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My Funny Valentine

Chris Taylor's
The Killer Secrets of Skyler Stone
My Funny Valentine

Chris Taylor and T. D. Perkins

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Chris Taylor's The Killer Secrets of Skyler Stone:

My Funny Valentine

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First Edition

Thank you to my Creator God, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, my wonderful Mom and best friend Trudy, my best friends Pauline, Amy, and Deborah, Higher Power Publishing, Top Shelf Editing, and everyone who read this book and gave me all of your awesome feedback and interest!

Thank you so much!

For My Creator God, My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, my wonderful Mom and best friend Trudy, my best friends Pauline, Amy, and Deborah-- with much love-- and for all the heroes and survivors of bullying, brutality, oppression, violation, and institutionalized injustice. I hope this series makes a difference in our society-- both for you-- and for all, by lighting a fire of fierce passion-- for truth, justice and moral righteousness, in the soul of our youth-- and in us all.

May this spark a new vision that burns deep and bright within the next generation.

ACT I: PART I - THERESA THOMPSON

CHAPTER

[1]

MEET THE VALENTINE KILLER

IT'S *HUMP DAY*-- WEDNESDAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-
JUSTICE DAY #5)-- and another missed call goes straight to voicemail, on the military-grade cell phone buried deep inside the pocket of his dark gray suit pants, as he wonders what he's reading. With his towering height as commanding as his good looks are rugged, Skyler's Dad-- Detective Sirius Stone-- stands, like a stone statue, with his head bowed in perplexed fixation, reading the blood red Valentine in his hand-- as he tries willfully to decode the message scripted so beautifully in the heart-shaped card.

An eerie wind blows the first few leaves of autumn past the weathered skin of Stone's grimacing face and coffee brown tie. They fly together, across the eccentrically long and ghostly white Cross that hangs from the big pearly gated Holy Trinity Church building, right in front of Stone-- as if completely unaffected by the disturbing scene before him.

“My Funny Valentine’s name is,” Detective Sirius Stone reads the card to himself out loud for the 3rd time in 3 minutes, “Jaleel Jackson Junior... This martyr was loved by a monster. Which one? 1: #WealthIsGod, 2: #WhitesAreGod, or 3: #WeAreGod? Either way-- People who think they are God ruin the world. I am Proof.”

Stone stares quizzically at the card, analyzing key words and phrases: “*Martyr*”-- “*Monster*”-- “*I am Proof*”. While everyone else on his squad was distracted by the obvious clues, like “Wealth Is God” and “Whites Are God” and “We Are God”-- Stone was focused on the more subtle ones...

Capital P, he thinks to himself. But *who* or *what* was “*Proof*” that *people* who think they are *God* ruin the *world*?

Most of the local and federal investigation units, and varied experts on this case, had already concluded that this psychopathic killer was just a random anybody, with a random grudge against the world. Just...

Random.

But there was something specific-- something detailed-- something intimate and... *personal*-- about these valentines, and the stock message they all bestowed. It told Stone’s instincts that this menace, her murders, her motives-- the 3 hashtagged titles on her monthly Valentine’s Day cards-- “Wealth Is God”, “Whites Are God”, and “We Are God”-- were *anything* but *random*.

Stone looks up at the 8th morbid crime scene delivered to him by The Valentine Killer, in only 8 months-- since Valentine’s Day of this year-- and, as usual, peppered with all the blushing pale red segments of a flower’s corolla. He gazes thoughtfully, in puzzled fixation, at the two dead bodies that sit up on the forest green foamy bottom platform of the sunny, red and yellow, church playground jungle gym, looking washed out, drained, pallid. And vacant.

Vacant of life.

The humming chatter and electric energy of TV crews, buzzing about, murmurs in the background, with spirited reporters editorializing the devastating news on their microphones, for their cameramen, as Mothers shield their children from the frightening sight, and rush them away from the park, horrified-- but curious-- craning their necks to see what all the gruesome fuss is about, going on behind the yellow crime scene tape.

The FLASH photography, by both the clinical forensics team and lively media journalists, quick-click simultaneously on the contrasting corpses, as technicians focus on all the potential evidence and newsmen focus on all the men and women in uniform. Meanwhile, local cops, and a slowly increasing amount of FBI agents, scatter about the park, studying the scene, as they begin vying for the same work space.

Mahogany mulch crunches beneath her feet as FBI Agent Maria Diaz steps next to Detective Sirius Stone. With her caramel skin, just as weathered as his dark chocolate complexion, on a fetching face, she almost meets him eye to eye, leggy and long-bodied. The gold Cross necklace tucked inside her professional white blouse glistens, reflecting the September sunlight that heats up her fitted timber wolf gray pantsuit, as a breath of fall air breezes through a few strands of her thick, wavy, shoulder length cocoa colored Puerto Rican hair.

On routine, her hazel eyes stare through a pleasant countenance, in equally puzzled curiosity, at the 2 deceased victims sprawled out on the kids' play area, before them.

“What’s your take, Stone? Yours? Ours? Random copycat? Legit?”

Stone sighs. The fatigue and weariness of this maddening puzzle shows limpidly on his face, through a thin veil of whatever is left of his faith in humanity.

“Well, Diaz. At first sight, they look the same. Both teens. Both males. Both Black. Both drowned, relocated-- and put on display at a church’s kiddy park. And both sprinkled with pink rose petals-- trademarked by The Valentine Killer.”

He nods at the bruised, broken, and forgettable-looking, departed boy, wearing a ripped, wet, blood-soaked, sleeve-less, fitted, white undershirt, soggy baggy blue jeans, and name brand sneakers, with corn-row styled kinky dark hair, and sadly ironic R.I.P. Cross tattoos all over his forearms.

“But-- one kid looks beat up and dirty. Like he’s been in a fight. Dressed like he’s underprivileged. And he was holding a Valentine Card that I’ll bet you lunch-- belongs to the other kid--”

He nods at the unbruised, handsome departed boy, wearing a clean, wet, dashing black tuxedo and shiny water-logged loafers, with clean-cut, close-cropped kinky dark hair.

“Well groomed and squeaky clean... Like he was going or coming from somewhere important-- dressed more upper class.”

He points to the handsome one’s hand, “Classy one even has the lipstick kiss printed carefully on his hand, with his hand placed strategically on his heart.”

He points to the forgettable one’s hand, “The poor one has lipstick, but it’s-- messy. Like it was done recklessly-- in a hurry. And his hand wasn’t placed on his heart, but left lower down on his belly. It’s like the killer cared a lot about one boy and--”

“Couldn’t care less about the other.” But her voice sounds a little more curious than claiming, as if she’s both suggesting and asking the idea at the same time.

“Worse.”

“Hated the other?”

“More like-- didn’t even see the other boy as a human being. See how he’s just crumpled there-- bloody, with those bruises on his stomach and neck? He was kicked repeatedly, before drowned. His killer had no respect for him or his identity. No reverence, like they did for the other kid.”

“Well clearly. Killers don’t care.” Diaz huffs in jaded disgust.

“Hmmm--”, Stone scrutinizes the lifeless bodies in front of them with baffled and curious interest, “The Valentine Killer, from what I grasp, seems to care very sincerely for her victims. Like she mourns them. This boy was revered. Admired.” He nods back at the handsome cadaver, “But this one was abused-- and disposed of.” He nods back at the forgettable cadaver, “Like the killer--”

“Is a manic depressive?” She sounds exuberant now, as if any nuance of a break in the case-- is a long coveted one.

“I was gonna say... she has a split personality--” Then he jolts slightly, in renewed dark realization, “Or partner. A sloppy, new, young, artless protégé, perhaps?”

Diaz shakes her head, “Female unsubs don’t commonly seek protégés. More of a male ego thing.”

“Maybe she has a male protégé. Cause the upper class boy looks like his killer is female. The lower class boy looks like his killer is male.”

Diaz smiles fondly at him, “You should really consider joining the team, Stone. We could really use your keen eye on a few cases.”

He smiles warmly at her, nobly honored at the thought.

Just then, young, ivory-hued, 29-year-old Officer Bob hoofs over to Stone and Diaz, in his police officer uniform, with a busy look of concentrated alarm all over his furrowed blonde brow.

“Uh-- Detective Stone-- Your son’s here to see--”

“Dad!”

Puffing like a track star who just won a marathon, adrenalized Skyler Stone cheerfully pops up in front of Officer Bob, holding his sleek, shiny, black, and neon-orange motorcycle helmet on the side of his torso, like a race car driver, as the tinny echo of Stevie Wonder's funky pop song, "Livin' For The City" blasts loudly inside of it, through the built-in speakers, connected to his iPod.

He quickly lifts his signature black and neon orange motorcycle sunglasses off of his eyes and onto the top of his forehead, with his black and neon orange leather motorcycle-gloved hands, as he jubilantly jogs over to Diaz, and Stone-- who suddenly switches to a warring frown of grave concern.

"Hey Agent Diaz", Sky nods politely at her.

"Hi Skyler", She smiles back as Officer Bob walks away.

"SKYLER? WHAT'S WRONG? WAS THERE ANOTHER SCHOOL SHOOTING??" Detective Stone grabs him, cutting them both off.

"What?" Confused Skyler breathes hard, as he swipes the sweat off his dark brow, with the wine red tie from his white tailored prep school uniformed shirt. It peeks out over his light beige khaki trousers, from underneath his gold sweater vest-- its dark ruby, diamond, and gold encrusted eagle emblem stitched seamlessly at the top right corner.

He is just as tall and strong as his Father, but wiry, with strong, strikingly princely features, a milk-chocolate toned face, with a pretty boy smile, and, behind his clear contact lenses-- deep, penetrating eyes, alive and electrified, with new hope-- but also cautious and aware-- and hiding something.

Whether he knows it or not.

There is a quiet, charming charisma, and good-hearted purity, that shines bright in Skyler Stone-- but also something else. Something hidden, and full of dangerous secrets-- A dark mystery-- lurking just beneath the surface. Much like his high height, high I.Q., and high social maturity-- the deep ocean of intensity layered thick within his deceptively sunny demeanor, is not typical of most 16-year-olds.

The same could be said of his secrets.

Suddenly, Skyler realizes what his worried Dad is saying to him, as he catches his breath with a light chuckle, "Oh! No-- You didn't answer your phone. I just need the town that great Grandpa Stone was born in, before he moved and did his 1st Black Owned Printing Press thing. For history. Skitzo's a stickler for details. He'll totally fail me if it's not in my report today." He huffs, "*I think it's cause he's racist.*"

Detective Stone relaxes, relieved, and flashes Skyler an unmoved, *knowing* look, "And *I think it's cause you keep falling asleep in his class.*" He digs inside his pocket, pulls out his cell phone, and sees 19 missed calls from Sky. He shakes his head at it, realizing, then takes his phone off silent.

Agent Diaz smirks to herself, amused by their typical dynamic, as another agent steps up to her, asking her a question. She nods and walks away with him, following yellow-tagged footprints that lead to under the trees, as forensic techs finish collecting tangible C.S.I. data on the bodies.

Skyler nods at his Dad, still heaving breath a bit, "OK. In all fairness-- It could be a little bit of *both.*"

"But mostly the latter."

"Right." Sky shrugs, still winded, "So anyway-- Do you remember?"

Detective Stone looks up from his phone to stare at Skyler, in weirded out disbelief for a moment, "You came all the way down here and missed a class... just to ask me that?"

Sky smirks, almost rolling his eyes in youthful laughter, “Missing *art* class.” He shrugs casually, “Miss V *loves* me. And you’re right next to school. OK, like, a few miles, whatever.” Sky bends over, holding his body in a slight bit of pain, as he tries to control his need for oxygen.

“And what would ya have done in class if I was way across town right now?”

“Uh-- *Failed*-- Duh.” Sky scoffs humorously.

Detective Stone shakes his head at him. Sky smiles slightly at his response-- But then he looks to his side and sees the 2 dead bodies laid out, beneath coral rose petals. He gasps, with a jolt, and quickly cringes, groaning in dark realization, as he looks away, profoundly repulsed. Stone realizes the crime scene’s nauseating affect on Skyler, and steps toward Sky to sedate him-- but not fast enough.

Suddenly, sickened Skyler vomits all over the forgettable corpse’s expensive kicks.

For a split second, a look of grossed out parental worry, masculine embarrassment, and boyish laughter, all compete for domination on Detective Stone’s awed face. But then he looks at the corpses, realizes Skyler barfed on top evidence-- and he instantly BLOWS A GASKET, YELLING at him.

“JEEZE, SKYLER! THIS IS AN *ACTIVE* CRIME SCENE! YOU JUST CONTAMINATED--” Detective Stone cuts himself off and closes his eyes, rubbing his head like he has a headache.

Sky raises a hand, cringing and bracing for more vomit. “Sorry, Sorry. Just--” He struggles to hold down the last bit of scrambled eggs, sausage and toast in his body as he shakes his head in disbelief, “Dad-- How do ya do this every day? And you wonder why I could never follow in your footsteps?”

Detective Stone sighs, exasperated, suddenly coming to grips with his son's puke-stained crime scene, just as thoroughly as he's learned to come to grips with how different his son is from him, "No, son. I no longer wonder."

He finally concedes, "It was Kentucky, Skyler. I believe your Great Grandpa was born in Louisville, Kentucky."

"Oh!", Skyler nods, relieved and grateful, as his long fingers quickly key the info into his smartphone. He grins big, and ambushes his business-zoned Dad with a giant bear hug.

Detective Stone jolts, stunned and humorously caught off guard, as Diaz, Bob, and other officers and agents chuckle at them, watching their funny Father-son moment.

"Thanks for being there to save me, Dad! You're a lifesaver!" Sky pulls back from his stupefied detective Dad and throws him a sardonic double thumbs up, "Oh and-- Good luck with the, um-- *death* stuff."

Sky nods at the crime scene, glancing at the dead bodies --and cringes again-- trying not to vomit. Everyone gasps, jumping toward him with plastic bags and buckets, to catch his blown chunks again. But he nods, as his stomach settles, adjusting to the fresh close proximity-- to young death.

"I'm good-- I'm good--" He assures them, "Ugh-- Later!"

Sky shakes his head at the bodies, unable to look at them, salutes his Dad and others, some of whom cavalierly salute back, then he races back down the hill to a blocked off parking lot, hops on his sleek, shiny black and neon-orange motorcycle, straps on his helmet, and inserts his neon blue key into the ignition.

Chained to his round, silver key chain, next to his house key and bike key, is an old, hard, wooden Cross, with chipped, dirty white paint peeling off at the edges, exposing the aged sepia brown wood beneath it. It's big-- but it's smaller than his hands.

Then he pops a stick of peppermint gum in his mouth-- and he speeds off, down the street.

Skyler's Dad-- Detective Sirius Stone-- looks down at the vomit-stained sneakers, now claiming The Valentine Killer's crime scene. He shakes his head at it and waves over the crew.

"FORENSICS-- Clean this up."

CHAPTER

[2]

MEET SKYLER'S GEEK SQUAD

Now sporting his crimson red blazer, Skyler raises his black and neon orange motorcycle sunglasses off of his dark hazel eyes again, and onto his head, takes off his black and neon orange leather motorcycle gloves, and buries them into the upper right side of his pants, along with his jingling motorcycle keys-- keeping the long, aged, white-flaked Cross, hanging from the key chain outside of his pocket.

He turns the cold shiny brass doorknob with one hand, and slides his other hand down the finely chiseled handcrafted design of the tall chestnut brown oak wood door, as he slowly edges it open-- and peeks his head inside, discretely, to scan the giant auditorium hall.

The walls are lined with mock candles, each faintly lit by a gentle luminescent night light bulb, instead of a wick and a flame, and all of them held up in long, shiny, golden candle holders. The ceiling is freckled with colossal crystal chandeliers, that dot the upper interior, in symmetrically arranged order-- dimly lit, to give a very low, soft, warm, golden yellow glow to the audience below.

The vast chamber is filled from end to end with various teenagers, ranging anywhere from 13 to 19, and all dressed like Skyler, in their burgundy red, white and gold prep school uniforms. As they restlessly shift in their seats, Skyler can see that many are distracted by their cell phone screens-- But he can hear many others, in hushed tones, more distracted by socializing with the fellow student or classmates sitting directly nearest them.

Although, a few do keep their eyes locked on the much more brightly lit stage, centered out in front of them, where a big, wide, gold-framed, white banner hangs, displaying the scarlet red letters, "Secret Ridge Christian High School Honors".

Beneath the banner stands Principal Bellmont, a short, fat, fiery woman, with a short, corporate-woman, salt-and-pepper haircut, dressed in a professional, black pin-striped, flaming red lady's business suit, with bright hot red heels, gleaming gold earrings, and a gold watch on her left wrist.

She chuckles assertively on the microphone as she speaks, pointing to 4 teens, who stand beside her, each holding something shiny in their hands. Sky's eyes don't land long enough on the youths to register who they are, and he's a bit far away to grasp what's happening there any way. So he turns his face back to the audience, and traces his eyes through the crowd, until he finds who he's looking for.

There-- Finally-- Skyler sees them-- In the back-- As usual. He instantly eases over to their row, and slips through the crowd, toward them.

"Scuse me--"

Distracted teens politely let Sky through, a few smiling and waving at him-- knowing who he is-- until he reaches the only empty seat in the room-- saved for him by his best friends-- Zack O'Neal, Lissette Lopez, Steven Chang, Hadji Singh and Nathan Hendrick-- and he plops down beside them.

The 4 of them wave casually at Skyler, and he nods back at them, smiling coolly, as he nudges his “best best” friend, Zack O’Neal, on the arm, to wake him up out of his doze.

Zack jolts awake, confused, and looks forward, pretending he was paying attention all along-- but he’s clearly unsure of what’s going on. Skyler, Steven, and Lissette laugh at his slackerdom, as Zack rubs his face, and looks to Lissette for a nonverbal synopsis of information. She points to Skyler. Zack turns, sees Skyler, and smiles chummily at him, finally getting it, then greets him with a friendly hello, by giving him some dap-- a warmer version of a handshake.

With his white shirt un-tucked, over his khaki trousers, and free of any vest, his first 2 buttons unbuttoned at the top, his tawny shoes off, his mustard colored socks on, his long wine red tie tied comically around the top of his head, like a clownish battle bandanna, and his crimson red blazer slung over the back of Skyler’s now occupied seat, to save it for him-- curly, golden blonde-haired Zack stretches into a yawn, and rattles his head, to wake up out of his drowsy lassitude, as his dark blue eyes gaze off aimlessly.

At 17, he is just as wiry, lean, and tall as Skyler, but with a turned up Irish nose, vanilla skin, and uncommonly pillowy lips for a White guy. It’s commonly known social trivia, that most girls usually find Zack just as attractive as Skyler-- until he opens his mouth and annoys the crap out of them-- or pisses them off with his prepubescent pranks...

Lissette unabashedly ogles Skyler, and the old, wooden, white-peeled Cross dangling from his pocket, with her intense dark eyes. But as Sky chuckles boyishly with Zack, casually glancing out at the 4 teens on stage-- clearly not as mindful of her presence as she is of his-- she immediately shifts to a silent scowl to herself, and folds her arms, glaring out at the 4 teens on stage, looking vexed.

Fit but not frail, she thinks for a moment, and then suddenly unties her white tailored shirt at the side bottom, and re-ties it tighter and higher up, to make it more fitted-- and to give more prominence to her moderate cleavage, by unbuttoning her top button, and boosting up her cherry red bra.

Steven suddenly notices, staring at her every move, and watching her with humorous concentration, as she hikes up her knee length khaki skirt an inch, pulls the blingy gold eagle pin off of her crimson red blazer, and clips it to her long wine red tie-- directly on her chest. He admires her as she combs her fingers through the endless straight, sable hair that dips all the way down to the bottom of her waist, with its subtle, dress-code challenging, brick red streaks running through it. Veiled behind heavy raven eye make-up, she has a bland, ordinary, 16-year-old face-- with beige skin, a long Brazilian nose, unremarkable lips, and average moderate height-- shorter than Sky, Zack, and Steven, but taller than Hadji and Nathan.

But then Steven sees her eyes flit to Skyler again, as if she's trying to see if she's got his attention yet, and Steven looks down, with a bummed out sigh, realizing who she's primming and performing for: Their best friend, Skyler. Yet again. Of course. A guy who's not even looking.

--And never is.

Suddenly, Steven doesn't feel like spectating, and the 4 teens on stage no longer amuse him either. With tanned yellow hue, dark and mysterious almond eyes, a flattened down Korean nose, and a typical mouth, Steven dons his preppy threads in proper form-- but with a wine red bow tie instead of a long one, a pair of semi-transparent, reddish-brown, sunset-gold-colored prescription sunglasses, a gold stud in his left ear, and a full head of jet black hair, aggressively styled, like it wants to be a Mohawk, but in a clean-cut, doesn't-break-the-school-dress-code-rules kind of way.

Skinny, and not particularly muscular, he has a nice, pleasant but pedestrian face, and average height for a guy, taller than Lissette, Hadji, and Nathan, but shorter than Skyler and Zack-- and the same age as Lissette and Skyler.

"You look nice." He smiles warmly at her.

Predictably stormy Lissette half-smiles, as she throws him a sideways glance, rolling her eyes to herself. Steven looks somberly baffled, but in an un-astonished way. As if he's trying to unlock a door that he's tried and failed to open a million times before, and he's no longer emotionally surprised that it won't open-- but still rather analytically flummoxed as to why his key won't work. Though not as tall as Skyler and Zack, Steven still gives off a good appearance. So it always stumped him as to why Lissette never looked at him the way she always looked at Sky.

With Nathan, Hadji, and Zack, it was obvious why she was never interested.

Nathan was an asthmatic shrimp in a wheelchair. Hadji was a portly, flaccid, make-believe-battle addict, obviously living in a totally different reality from everyone else.

And Zack? Despite his noticeably good looks, he was a pathologically self-absorbed *child*, with the depth and sensitivity of a court-jester-costumed, drag-racing *bulldozer*, at a sacredly heroic martyr's anguished *funeral service*.

But *him*? Perceptive, generous *Steven*? Why was Lissette always so impassive and walled off to *him*?

Suddenly, a couple snickering guys in front of Lissette throw a wad of paper at her, and it lands directly on her bosom. They pump their fists in the air, cheering at how they scored, as they leer lasciviously at Lissette's feminine features.

Lisette gasps, startled, and looks down at the ball of notebook paper on her chest-- Then she looks up to see where it came from. She spots the giggly boys ogling her goofily, as one holds his phone up, pointing to it with a silly grin, and nodding at her dumbly, as he mouths, "Your number?", with a hopeful shrug.

"Ugh!" Fuming Lisette sees red, immediately grabs the wad, spits on it, and hurls it back at him, hitting him square in the face. But the boys only laugh at her upset, entertained by her fury. Enraged, she leans forward, grabs their heads, and smacks them into each other.

They grab their heads in pain, mouthing, "Ow", as Lisette leans back, folding her arms, furious.

Steven just shakes his head at the boys, as Skyler and Zack look over at him and Lisette, just now starting to notice the commotion.

"Some guys will never grow up."

"Shut up, Steven."

"What did *I* do???" Bewildered Steven stares in hopeless confusion, at Lisette, expecting some kind of logical explanation for her *clearly* irrational mood swing toward him. What he gets:

Nothing.

He unconsciously glances at concerned Skyler, who stares back at him with a furrowed brow, mouthing, "What happened?". Steven just sort of shrugs, points to the Paper Ball Boys, and then points to Lisette. Still at a loss, Sky looks at the 2 hooligans sitting in front of Lisette, who rub their throbbing heads, and start balling up even bigger wads of paper-- this time spitting on them, like Lisette did.

They nod mischievously at each other, lift their paper balls, turn around to swing, and are suddenly faced with Skyler-- who sits in Lisette's seat now-- while Lisette sits in his-- and he grabs their wrists, mid-lunge.

They gasp, startled, and eye silently fierce Skyler, in skittish trepidation.

“Looking for someone?” His voice is friendly, but his stare is threatening.

The boys sense it.

“We-- we were just playing--”, the boy who asked her for her number says.

“Drop it.” But Skyler’s eyes never fall on the paper balls. His chillingly placid gaze stays fixated on the stunned gape of the wet-wad launchers-- who immediately drop their soggy, saliva-soaked paper balls to the floor, knowing exactly what he’s referring to.

“We’re sorry--”, the other boy says.

Skyler scoffs in dismissive agitation, “I don’t care how sorry you are. Just make sure it never happens again. Or I’ll make sure I show you just how sorry you are. K?”

The boys nod fervently, clearly not looking for a throw-down-- or any bad blood with Sky. Skyler nods, appeased by this, and lets their arms go. They quickly turn around in their seats, and throw each other, “Whoa, WTF, OOPS” expressions.

Skyler leans back in Lissette’s former seat. From Skyler’s former seat, Lissette reaches across again-sleeping Zack’s lap, and nudges Skyler’s arm. He looks over at her.

“Thank you.”, she mouths. He smile-nods at her, shrugs with dismissive friendliness-- and looks back at the 4 teens on stage, as if what he just did was nothing, no big deal.

But clearly it was *everything*-- and a *very* big deal-- to Lissette.

She gazes longingly at Skyler as he looks forward-- ever more enamored by him. Wanting him deeply-- with every bone in her body-- and every fiber of her being.

This was the man-- the only man-- who she knew in her heart of hearts-- she would do *anything* for.

Steven watches Lissette watching Skyler, and shakes his head with a lackadaisical smirk, still completely clueless as to why she doesn't see *him*-- the way she sees *Sky*.

Meanwhile, heavy-set Hadji leans forward in his seat, next to Steven, grinning goofily at the screen of the smart device in his hands, as he burns the key pad with his fast bronze fingers-- totally immersed in yet another video game.

He has no idea that anything new has happened-- outside of his virtual role play sport-- even though it all played out right in front of him.

Darker than Sky, and chaotically swathed in a half-tucked, mis-buttoned white shirt, mismatched cream and lemon socks, and a long wine red tie hung loosely around his neck-- with his crimson red blazer draped conveniently across his lap-- he freaks out, with wild eyes, oscillating between proud victory and disgusted rage, at every frame-- of every moment-- of every second-- of his digital competition.

Flat nosed with a standard mouth, 16-year-old Hadji is taller than Nathan, but shorter than everyone else, with thick, straight, ebony, East Indian hair-- messy, un-styled, and bigger than it should be-- like he never gets a haircut until the school dress code enforcer tells his Mom to.

Breathing loudly, through an oxygen tube up his long English nose, Nathan sits next to Hadji, in an electric wheelchair, with a bluetooth in his ear. His pale blue eyes peer attentively at the 4 teens on stage, through the thin, gold-rimmed glasses on his milky face, as the sleek silver machine for his medical matters monotonously puffs in and puffs out, humming softly in the background, from inside the clinical coal-black backpack behind his wheelchair.

Lean and wiry beneath his proper uniform garb and wine red bow tie, Nathan is the youngest of the group, at 15, and shorter than everyone but Hadji, with thin lips and light brown, dirty blonde hair. Unruffled by all the drama, he, apparently, is the only one of the 6 friends, with a long enough attention span, to watch Principal Bellmont speak and gesture to the 4 blushing teens standing alongside her.

Lisette realizes she's sitting on Zack's crimson blazer, pulls it out from behind and beneath her, and shoves it into Zack's lap, radiating an indestructible smile that's rare for Lisette, as she gets comfortable in her new seat-- compliments of Skyler.

Zack instantly wakes back up, holding his blazer-- and his faintly punched stomach-- and looks around, from side to side. He looks like he just entered The Twilight Zone or The Matrix-- and his equilibrium is off.

"Wait-- Weren't you 2 just... on opposite sides of... --Nevermind." He starts to go back to sleep, but Skyler smacks his shoulder.

"Hey-- What's goin on here? I miss anything?", Skyler nods toward the stage, and coolly eyes again-yawning, stretching, shrugging Zack, as Sky pulls out a water bottle from his long khaki pant pockets.

Zack shakes his head to himself with a smirk, as he stretches his arms and torso, cracks his neck loudly, and throws Skyler a funny, knowing look, as if to say, "*Yeah right. Dude-- You know this painfully boring crap is the bane of our existence.*"

Without need for any actual verbal confirmation, Skyler smirks, with an understanding nod-- immediately knowing what Zack means-- as he chugs down a mouthful from his pure, bottled water, swigs it around with his tongue, swallows it, and pops another peppermint gum stick in his mouth. Finally, the burning sensation in Skyler's throat-- and the taste of regurgitated food in his mouth-- starts to wane.

Dead teenagers.

Skyler can't help but flash back to the crime scene with his Dad, where, less than 45 minutes ago, he'd just seen their cold, lifeless bodies, laid out in front of him, with pink rose petals sprinkled all over them-- as if almost mocking them.

And at a children's park? Behind a church? What kind of sick, perverted mind would do something like that?

Then he realizes a new, jarring thought, as a cold chill runs down his spine.

They were his age...

*...They could have been **him**.*

Skyler can't recall ever seeing anything so transparently disturbing before-- or so intimately gruesome.

Not up close and visible.

Not... *REAL*.

Suddenly, Sky notices a *New Text Message* on his high tech cell phone. It reads: "*FROM: Mentor Yogi-- To Overcome Loss, You Must Bear The Cross*", with a golden yellow emoticon Cross next to it. Skyler briefly contemplates this sentiment from his martial arts spirit mentor, half-wondering what it means-- and half already knowing.

Finally, Skyler looks out again at the stage, and starts to register what's happening, as he watches Principal Bellmont talk to the audience, next to the 4 teens, who he didn't really look at before. But now, suddenly--

He recognizes them.

CHAPTER

[3]

MEET THE CORE 4

The alabaster faced boy with naturally bright red spiked hair, and freckles everywhere, is Nelson Hart-- 16. As an individual, Skyler remembers having one legitimate encounter with Nelson, in debate class, when Skyler won a debate on why and how society needs a viable 3rd party, in their rigged political system. Nelson caught up with Skyler after class, and invited him to lead a political club that he wanted to start.

But between his schoolwork, his game nights with his friends, his spirit and martial arts training sessions with Mentor Yogi, and using all of his spare time to build things-- he had to decline. He didn't even like politics. He just had a few good ideas. But in truth-- he hated that world. In fact, Skyler loathed *any* realm that resembled a thick, twisted, profoundly wicked spiderweb-- or cult-- cemented deep into the dark, dank bowels of the stenchiest sewage *hell* in society.

No matter how elite it was.

--Or thought it was.

And *that* was his idea of "*politics*".

So the idea of starting a club to lead a bunch of *other* people in such a field, to him, was laughable.

But judging by how things turned out in his high school career-- Skyler guessed that Nelson never started that club. Because right now, on stage, Nelson doesn't look like the founder of a "Viable 3rd Political Party" Club. He looks more like a lost deer, caught in headlights-- confused-- as if unsure of why they're there, standing beside Principal Bellmont, before the whole school-- completely perplexed as to why this is happening.

Understandable.

Skyler silently agrees with him. *If Sky was in their position, he would find all this loud pomp and circumstance bizarrely counter-productive to the nature of the club that the 4 of them actually started together...*

Then there's the 2nd member of their operation-- Mary Meeks-- 17-- who stands next to Nelson, smiling delightedly. She has olive skin, fashionably short, white-blond hair, and comically giant, round, smiley face earrings, almost half the size of her face-- only one isn't smiling, or yellow-- it's red-- and angry. For a brief and passing moment, Skyler wonders if girls' ornaments really come like that, or if Mary just got creative and put them that way on her own, being as vogueishly unusual and stylishly unique as Mary was known to be.

Neither would surprise him.

But to be honest, she looked more like she belonged in a punk rock band than in this group. Then again-- The 4 of them were always a sharp lesson in why one shouldn't always make "judging a book by its cover" their default mechanism.

The only real moment Sky could remember ever having with Mary was when she challenged him, Zack, and Lissette in an online game, pretending to be somebody else, and she won.

At school, the next day, she came up to Sky, teasingly shoved him hard in the shoulder, and told him that was the most fun she'd had in awhile, and that she wanted into their Geek Night Gaming Nights, to hang out with them in her spare time.

Lisette wasn't excited about the invitation. Though, when she realized that Mary had a boyfriend at the time-- and wasn't Skyler's "personality type", she welcomed the idea of having a play-sister among all of her play-brothers. But Mary never showed up to Geek Night.

Not one.

She said it was, "because of all the extracurricular work she was doing in the enterprise that she started with her main crew". However, when Skyler hacked into her text messages and saw what the leader of her "main crew" was saying to her, about hanging out with them-- especially one of them in particular-- Skyler knew otherwise.

He never told anyone that.

And his friends would have totally understood. Even commended him for snooping, and curiously harassed him to find out what he discovered. --Just to be nosey. --*And* they would have verbally bashed Mary's "main crew" leader, behind closed doors, for some of the things she said to Mary about them.

Skyler's friends would go to war for him.

And for the group.

Or at least passionately *want* to.

But for some reason-- Skyler just never felt any desire to share his secret tidbit of social drama info with them.

Not this time.

Maybe because it involved *him*.

And apparently, skipping Skyler Stone's Geek Nites with his besties in The Game Room-- worked wonders for Mary Meeks. Because now, here she is, standing before the entire student body, getting publicly recognized by the head of the school, with her 4 teammates-slash-bosom-buddies, for all the work they've done together.

In fact, just the mere thought of "gaming" looks so far away from Mary at this moment-- she looks so humorously proud and beaming with overjoyed excitement-- that any minute now she might just POP-- like a party balloon, and fly away on a cloud-- drifting straight into pure bliss.

And then, standing next to Mary, is the 3rd member of the operation. Abraham Davis-- 17-- A tall, dark chocolate, criminology nerd, with big, thick glasses, long, thick, woolly, dark, burnt sienna dreadlocks, down to his waist, and the slightest hint of whatever was left of his Jamaican accent.

Skyler studies Abraham with an unexpectedly icy gaze, as Abraham inconspicuously checks his lit up, silently ringing cell phone, furrows his brow at what he sees on it, and looks up in calculated, grimacing thought, slipping the phone discretely back into his pants pocket-- all while Principal Bellmont rattles on to all the students.

Sky had a strange and awkward connection with Abe. On one hand-- they socially (publicly) knew each other, as the only 2 guys in history class, who found out, through their school's annual, "Trace The Roots of Your Heritage" DNA Testing Event, that they were *loosely* related-- being that they both just happened to be distant descendants of the same Noble Warrior Tribe of Ethiopians, in Ancient Africa.

On the other hand... they individually (privately) knew each other, as the only 2 guys in school, who both dated the 4th member of their operation-- AKA The Leader-- The Founder-- of their teen mystery quest enterprise called-- "The Core 4".

One day, when Skyler stayed late after school, to finish an art class project that Miss V totally lost her mind over-- in a good way-- a hilariously over-the-top, and typical “eccentric-artist” good way-- Sky heard giggling, and his curiosity got the better of him. So he peeked around a corner, and saw Abraham with his ex-girlfriend-- Mary’s “main crew” leader-- kissing and laughing with each other.

She was trying to get back to her work.

But Abe kept teasing her.

And apparently, he spoke her magic language.

Because he said some type of coded casework verbiage that Sky had not a clue of-- and it was like a key that found the right lock, and opened the door, perfectly.

She instantly melted in his arms. Skyler hadn’t thought about her, in a romantic or desiring way, in 2 years. But for some odd reason, in that moment-- he would have given anything just to know whatever it was that Abraham said to her-- what it meant to her.

Before Skyler could look away, his phone rang with a message from Nathan, alerting the distracted lovebirds to Skyler’s presence.

Embarrassingly.

Sky gasped and quickly turned it off, to silent, but as soon as he looked back up-- Abe was already staring at him, and she was intentionally looking away-- as if she couldn’t meet his gaze.

“Sorry.” Skyler shrugged casually and coolly, “Thought I heard something. Didn’t know it was you guys. --Later.”

Sky started to walk away, with the hard, stained, white-flaked, wooden Cross, on his motorcycle key chain, swinging from his pocket, as Abraham looked with concern at Sky’s ex-girlfriend, who nodded back at Abe-- whatever that meant. But very soon, Skyler would know what that meant, as Abraham jogged after Skyler and stopped him, looking anxious.

“Hey-- Sky-- Hold up-- Wait--”.

Skyler cringed as he slowed to a rolling stop, really not wanting to have this-- or any-- conversation, with either of them. But especially Abraham.

Abraham was the odd one out-- the foreign factor-- as far as Sky was concerned. He had no power of healing all the unresolved issues between Skyler and his ex. To the contrary--

Abe only compounded them.

But, being his gregarious, cordial, hail-fellow-well-met self, Skyler slapped on a fake smile, turned around, and greeted a surprisingly flustered-looking Abraham.

Immediately, Sky realized, in that flash of a moment-- in seeing Abe's unexpected and dazed anxiety, that this exchange was more about Abraham than it was about Skyler.

"Hey, uh, I know you and Theresa use to date, and-- the whole school knew about it, but, uh-- she, and I, are trying to keep our relationship private, um, and, well, cause, see"

He stammered, "--she didn't like all the negative attention she got from people who like you, after she-- and you, well-- ya know-- and I, well-- I have a really strict family. We-- we're not supposed to be together. My parents don't want me dating till I'm in like college or whatever. And they'd kinda blow a gasket if they knew I had a girlfriend. So-- we were-- just thinking-- I mean-- I-- she--"

Abraham huffed, as if frustrated more with himself than anything, "We would just really appreciate it if... --if you could please just keep all this... and-- what you just saw-- a secret. Please. Only Nelson and Mary know. And, well, you, now."

Skyler eyed Abraham in curious new thought.

But not in a good way.

His dark suspicions were working overtime.

And all this guy asked of him-- begged of him, really-- was to keep his mouth shut. --Something Skyler never had a problem with doing.

But a gnawing feeling was nipping at Sky's heels, and he couldn't just put the thought away. So he made a split second decision, to play along-- and then get what he wanted.

"Oh yeah, no, sure. I stay out of peoples' business."

Lie.

"I keep my nose clean."

Lie.

"Your secret is the safest it could possibly be-- with me."

Another lie.

It bothered Sky that he could lie so easily when he had to, and not feel bad about it.

Is that a thing? Skyler wondered to himself. *Can a person feel bad about the fact that they don't feel bad about something that they know, theoretically, they should probably feel bad about?*

Skyler shrugged it off, awaiting Abe's predictably relieved response.

"Oh, thank *God*. You have no idea how bad my parents can get. I once saw them take my big brother out of a super strict *elite* school, and send him all the way to an all-boys boarding school overseas, in some freezing place, where the guys there hazed the crap out of him. Worst 3 years of his entire life-- just to break him and his girlfriend up.

"They say it's cause of our religion, but I think they're just deathly afraid that one of us is gonna bring home a disease, or a baby out of wedlock, for them to have to spend their golden retirement years raising. They don't believe in abortion, and they wouldn't have the heart to let their grandchild be put up for adoption. It's against our family values not to take care of each other. So you keeping this between us means a lot to both of us. Especially after how sourly things ended between you and Theresa--"

Theresa. There goes that name again. *He kept saying it.* After Skyler had worked so hard to forget it. Not out of lost love or a broken heart. Not even out of hatred or spite. But purely out of a need for peace of mind.

Trying to decode Theresa, and why she was the way she was, and then how or why she transformed into treating him the way she did-- so coldly-- so hostilely-- so wrongly-- was like trying to decode the world's biggest Roubaix Cube-- that was wrapped in a great puzzle-- wrapped in a great maze-- wrapped in a great enigma-- wrapped in a great riddle-- and written in an obscure foreign language, that nobody knew or cared about.

It was exhausting.

Infuriating.

And it consumed most of Skyler's thoughts for a good 2 years straight. He tried not to be fixated on the long lost forgotten drama-- but he couldn't help the way his mind worked. He was a hacker. A gamer. And an inventor. There was no matrix he couldn't hack. No game he couldn't play. No problem he couldn't solve, with one of his many technological inventions.

But Theresa was a matrix he couldn't hack.

Theresa was a game he couldn't play.

Theresa was a problem he couldn't solve.

And somehow-- this stranger-- this mysteriously random, long lost "relative", from an ancient past bloodline-- *could*.

It was already too hard for Skyler to cope with his own inability to understand something that seemed so simple. It was too much to see how somebody else-- somebody so much like him-- and yet so different-- so easily *did*.

It took Skyler years to stop obsessing over the matrix-- the game-- the problem-- that he couldn't understand-- by dropping her name from all conversation and thought-- a hard feat to achieve considering how they saw each other every day in class.

But he did it.

He succeeded.

And now, here Abraham was, bringing her name back up into Skyler's psyche, as he cluelessly spilled his guts to Sky, like they'd been friends for a lifetime.

It's amazing. Skyler thought to himself. What people will tell you-- How people will trust you-- with some of their biggest secrets-- and even tell you how to pull the rug right out from underneath them-- as soon as you tell them what they want to hear-- or appear to be what they want you to be-- or already think you are. Just give them what they think they want-- and they will unintentionally do the same for you.

Skyler glanced casually back at Theresa, as Abe rattled on, basically drawing a blueprint map and directions out for Sky, if-- for any reason-- at any given moment-- Skyler wanted to totally wreck their secret love affair, purely out of spite. He could tell that's why Theresa hung back in the shadows, looking both sad and guilty, as she sulked in a slumped position. It was as if she had already conceded defeat-- as if she just automatically *knew* Skyler would rat them out.

That only pissed Skyler off more.

Shows how much she ever bothered to get to know him, he thought. He had no intention of destroying their-- whatever it was they had. And he never had a history of wrecking lives and ruining relationships. That's not who he was. He was a CREATOR. Not a DESTROYER. Something Theresa never VALUED-- or even NOTICED.

And yet he could tell-- just by watching her gloom about the hall, how she immediately assumed that the life of her secret happiness at school was over-- just because he-- Sky-- her ex-flame-- knew their secret.

No, Skyler thought. If he wanted to seriously hurt Theresa-- he could have-- back then. When things first went bad between them. Or maybe later, after she friend-blocked Mary from joining his gaming posse, and sent her a bunch of texts and emails telling her not to hang out with his Geek Nite crew, and to stay away from him-- filling her head with all these scary elaborate lies about Skyler being "crazy", and hiding "secrets" that he never told Theresa about.

What secrets?

And "crazy" is acting hot one minute and cold the next, with no rational explanation as to why, Theresa. THAT'S crazy.

So YOU'RE the one who acted CRAZY.

Skyler realized he was mentally backpacking across The Red Sea again, going down a dark black hole to nowhere, when he finally pulled himself back, touched down to earth again, and suddenly cut Abraham off, asking him the burning question that had been on his mind since the second he met him, freshman year.

"How long?"

Abraham abruptly stopped babbling, and looked at Skyler, with a sort of winded, confused, caught off guard expression.

"What?"

"How long?"

Abe laughed a bit awkwardly, kind of blushing at his own admitted confusion, "I'm sorry-- How long what?"

"How long have you 2 been together?"

“Oh!”, Abraham scoffed politely, “Years! Heheh, since freshman-- year.” He stopped, suddenly realizing why Skyler was asking-- and realizing the fact that he gave him the wrong answer. “Uh-- But listen-- I can explain--”

“No need. Don’t worry. I won’t tell a soul.” Sky fake-smiled politely, turned on his heels, and sauntered away.

“No-- wait-- you don’t understand. Skyler-- We weren’t together until *after* you broke up. IT’S NOT LIKE THAT SKYLER! SKY!”

Abe called after Sky-- and Sky heard his words echoing down the great golden yellow hall-- followed by Theresa’s infamous “sshing”, as she hushed Abraham loudly-- and ironically, pulling him out of sight, to talk to him-- and probably chastise him for being so blindly forthcoming with potentially destructive intel. But it didn’t matter. Sky was walking away-- and there was no way in 3 hells he was gonna turn back.

Skyler didn’t love Theresa.

Skyler didn’t even hate Theresa. Not any more, at least. Or maybe he never really did.

Skyler simply hated the way Theresa so cavalierly trashed him-- his love-- and his soul. Privately disrespecting him. Putting everyone-- including complete strangers-- above him. Never defending him. Verbally taking all of her self-imposed stress out on him. Ignoring him. Devaluing him. Belittling him. Fighting him. Never being honest with him. Never communicating *OPENLY* with him. Never talking about *REAL* things that *MATTERED* with him. Making him feel like being alone felt better than being with her. And in the end, she ended up being an impossible code to crack-- an unsolvable puzzle-- something so simple-- that he could not understand.

He had no grand master plan or deep dark conspiracy to “take her down” or “mess up her life”. --Never did.

OK, so their short-lived time together ended up being a high school PR *nightmare* for years to come-- for much longer than they'd ever even been together-- which was only, like, 3 or 4 weeks-- a lifetime in youth culture.

But still.

So what?

That kind of psychotically obsessed vengeance wasn't who he was-- and she, of all people, sure wasn't worth the jail time.

Or the guilt.

Skyler just wanted to know some new data, that he could potentially plug into the secret file with her name on it, on the mental shelf of trials and mysteries in his life-- that he kept in the back of his brain.

So he could finally crack her code and understand the madness.

In all honesty, what Skyler really wanted-- was fair and respectfully honest closure. Something he always felt Theresa cheated him out of-- and owed him-- but never gave.

Alas, though. Now he knew-- that there was another lover on their ship-- A "coworker", who was just as obsessed and consumed with the same overblown "casework" crap that she always was. Now Skyler saw some semblance of logic to her behavior with him.

Something he could latch onto, to make sense of the code he couldn't crack-- To understand "the nice nerd girl" who-- privately-- was so coldly mean and shamefully short-tempered with him, behind closed doors-- no matter how kind and helpful he was to her.

There was someone else.

Suddenly, Skyler's obsession officially found its end. His hidden malice about the way she had treated him-- it started to genuinely dissipate. It wasn't that he liked the idea of being cheated on. But rather that-- he liked the idea of understanding *why*. *Why* someone could so easily *mistreat* someone like him. The way she did. And then somehow come away thinking *they* were the victim.

--Or that they had *nothing* to do with the bad *juju* that *plagued* their situation. Despite the betrayal and humiliation-- Skyler liked knowing-- *WHY*.

Hacking the matrix.

Playing the game.

Solving the problem.

And even though Abraham tried to assure Sky that it wasn't like that-- it didn't matter. In fact, now Skyler would *rather* believe it was that way-- So that his mind could finally *rest*-- and *move on*.

Which it did.

That day.

Now, back at the Secret Ridge Christian High School Honors ceremony, Skyler watches Abe as he checks his phone again, on stage, and he starts to wonder, seriously, what on earth the guy keeps looking at, on his phone, during the middle of their big scholastic moment in the sun together, with his girl and their best friends.

His gaze on Abraham is no longer icy, now that he remembers the bittersweet release of freedom, from the chains of constant confusion and angst-- that were cursed upon him, by Theresa. Chains that Abe unknowingly broke Skyler free from-- with freedom that Abe unknowingly gave Skyler easy access to-- that day, when Skyler found out about him and Theresa in freshman year. Now, suddenly, Skyler looks...

--At peace.

Besides-- Skyler couldn't hate Abraham. As goofily honest and open as Abe was with him, it actually made Abraham seem endearing to him-- and Sky liked his childishly gullible, trusting, truth-loving nature.

It's weird, Skyler thinks, how, in retrospect, you can end up finding your replacement more likable than the one who replaced you.

Then Skyler's eyes fall on the 4th member-- the founder and leader of the operation-- his only ex-girlfriend-- the infamous star of his brief trip down memory lane--

Theresa Thompson.

At 16, Theresa has smooth, milk chocolate skin-- slightly darker than Sky's, a pleasant nose, plain but pretty lips, conservative gold stud earrings, and a sea of long, skinny, black braids, that go all the way down, past her waist.

Skyler always wondered how a girl who kept so busy and "professional" all the time, with all her demanding "case work", had time to maintain such a lofty mane-- and he marveled at how it didn't seem to get in the way of her compulsive on-the-go nature and lifestyle.

No longer affected by her name or face, Skyler looks on at Theresa, emotionally unmoved. However, he does notice something about her that's different. It's not the way she looks-- or rather-- *it is*. But it's not in what she's wearing-- It's in her face.

Skyler watches Theresa carefully. He blinks, looking again-- closer-- trying to understand if he's seeing correctly. He stares at her, as she looks around the audience, quickly shifting her gaze, as if trying to find someone-- or figure something out.

Her eyes dart out into the crowd, scanning every row, over and over again. Until finally, Theresa looks at the back row. Her eyes meet Sky's-- And there it is-- He sees it-- Right there-- For the first time in all his years of knowing Theresa, he sees the one thing on her face that he has never seen before--

Quietly panicked...

Secretly terrified...

Irrepressible...

--*FEAR*.

CHAPTER

[4]

MEET THERESA'S SECRET

Principal Bellmont finally concludes her long-winded and totally unnecessary speech to the teens, standing at her regal looking, burgundy red, white and gold podium, before her very bored and distracted audience-- as Theresa and her best friends AKA Core 4 work-mates, stand behind the excited woman, nervously holding their 4 weirdly large golden eagle trophies.

“So today, we at Secret Ridge Christian High honor our top teen detectives-- Theresa Thompson, Abraham Davis, Mary Meeks, and Nelson Hart, of The Core 4 Truth Sleuths! For their *EXCELLENT* work, in breaking up the big school drug ring! No more lives lost to drugs! Give our heroes some applause! *These are the heroes we’ve been waiting for!*”

Everyone *golf* claps for the 4 awardees, amidst all the muted chatting and texting of youth, who are either completely disinterested-- or totally preoccupied-- by a more gratifying interest. The principal drapes a big gold medal around each neck-- Theresa’s, Abraham’s, Mary’s, and Nelson’s.

In the back of Skyler’s mind, he still wonders if he was right. If what he saw on Theresa’s face was, in fact, a flash of unbridled fear.

Since-- as soon as he saw it-- she was immediately called to attention by the principal-- for whom she gave her most glorious grin-- a grin Skyler didn't even know she was capable of-- in reception of her gold medal.

Maybe it was all in his head?

Perhaps he was imagining things?

Stranger things have happened.

Suddenly, Zack takes Skyler's mind off yet another mystifying befuddlement relating to Theresa, with a giant, comically kiddish smirk, as he leans in to Sky.

"*Heroes we been waiting for-- RIGHT. Lucky they never got YOU to join their goofy little club-- or you'd be a spectacle of social leprosy right now.*" Zack shakes his head in genuine disbelief, mocking a funny high-pitched woman's goofy-positive voice,

"*Yay! Let's applaud the school snitches who buzzkill everybody's fun! And if you don't, you're racist! Cause with half the team being Black, and half the team being White-- both sides just coming together, to solve petty teen crimes, in unity, harmony, and peace-- like it's never been done before-- they're the united nations of racial togetherness!*"

He scoffs in sincere disgust at the pretentious politicking, "Oh yeah? Well so's our gaming group. But we don't go around forcing our agenda on everybody."

Skyler smirks to himself, shaking his head in agreement, "Dude-- I wouldn't join their little *cult* cause I'd rather *hack* life than *study* it."

This was partially true-- but obviously not the whole reason.

"I mean, think about it. We study every day. Who wants to join a stupid club just to do more of it?" Sky shrugs in his own brand of incredulous awe, "I'm sure Mrs. Winslow's cat will be fine, and the infamous locker stink bomber will stop. No need to waste my precious time researching trivial crap."

Zack thinks for a moment and admits, “*Well*, Core 4 *did* find out who kept stealing all our pizza on Fridays.”

“Trivial.”

“Not to me! I loves me my pizza bro!” Zack shoots him a funny, goofy, starving face-- and Skyler can’t help but chuckle with him, as the principal continues on the mic.

“We now appoint The Core 4 as our *Official High School Detectives!*” She proclaims proudly, as if it means something.

Deeply offended by this endless boredom, Zack gives in to his cranky inner child, against his better judgment-- and against the strict school rules-- as he shouts back at the principal, “DO THEY GET *PAID???*”

Principal Bellmont gasps as a few students in the audience laugh at this, and she looks out into the crowd, trying to spot the defiant loudmouth, who apparently ruffled the fancy feathers in her otherwise masterfully poised demeanor-- with a legally legitimate question.

Suddenly, Theresa, Abraham, Mary, and Nelson all glance at their trophies and medals, in the new realization that trophies and medals don’t pay for phone bills, gas money, shopping sprees, movie tickets-- or even lunch. Then they flash each other a mutually curious look of want.

“WHO SAID THAT??”, Bellmont snaps humorously at the big school of fish sitting in front of her. But no one’s biting. In fact, somebody sitting in front of Zack even gives him some dap, laughing.

People might mess with nerds.

People might mess with a pack of friends.

But nobody messed with Skyler’s pack of nerdy friends.

People liked them. They were sort of, “the cool nerds”, everyone enjoyed, respected, and in some ways-- even admired.

Skyler can't help but glance around at the snickering students nearby, proud of their silent solidarity. He even looks briefly at the 2 doofuses who harassed Lissette with their little paper balls. They catch his eye-- and quickly look away.

Their lips are sealed.

A subtle smile slowly wanders its way onto Skyler's serenely amused countenance.

A bit miffed that she can't place where the voice came from-- and no one's helping-- Principal Bellmont just simply clears her throat, nervously pulling her already-closed, red lady's suit jacket even more closed, across her dicky blouse-- and she decides to ignore the inquiry.

"Well! That wraps up our impromptu award ceremony! Good day, students!" The principal quickly hurries off the stage with the 4 teens.

Zack smirks, shaking his head, "Nope-- *LAME*." Then he thinks out loud, "Wow. If I'd only thought to say that sooner-- I maybe coulda saved us all a good hour's worth of boring speech crap."

Skyler laughs at the thought, shaking his head, as they all get up to leave. He looks back toward the stage, as Principal Bellmont ushers the 4 teens off of it. They follow her lead. But, as if she can feel his eyes on her, Theresa turns to look back-- and her eyes catch Sky's again.

She only looks at him for a fleeting moment-- but in that moment-- it's clear-- Skyler didn't mistake that look in her eyes. There was something there. Something was wrong. He didn't know what. He didn't know why. And this time-- he didn't even know if he really wanted to know at all. But something wasn't right. Something was large-scale bad. And he didn't need facts. He didn't need figures. Cause he saw all the evidence he needed...

He saw it all...

...in Theresa's eyes.

The bell rings later that day, as Skyler and his other Secret Ridge Christian High classmates grab their backpacks, and leave class in a stream of students. Skyler stops to grab a cool sip of water from the shiny, dark, reddish brown, copper, angel-statue fountain-- still donning his black and neon-orange sunglasses atop his head, with his signature, thick, aged, dirty, white-peeled wooden Cross, that hangs out of his pants pocket, from his motorcycle key chain.

--And he feels the eyes of someone on his back.

He looks back to see if someone is watching or following him, but whoever it is, hides behind a corner, out of his view, as soon as he turns to look.

A little weirded out, he turns and heads over to his locker. He opens it, and is greeted by one of his mechanical inventions-- a collapsible, pull-out, laptop tray, made of copper and steel, with a fiber optic lens, in the shape of 1 creepy, large, cyclops eyeball, sticking out from the back of the tray, on a long snake-like wire, that talks to him.

“Greetings, Skyler. Would you like to continue on to Chapter 12 of your mystery romance novel, “Love and Murder” now?”

The clasp-handed arm-device attached to the tray, pulls out a book with the cover of a buxom young woman on it, wearing a long, ruffled, pink dress, as she falls in ecstasy, into the arms of a bare-chested muscle man, who wears black pants, a black shirt, with the sleeves rolled up, and a blood red sash for a belt, as he kisses her chest.

The machine clumsily shoves the book forward, in Sky’s face, as Skyler lunges back simultaneously. Other students going by, look over inquisitively at him, and either giggle, or crane their necks to see what the machine is handing him.

Skyler quietly freaks out, in social panic, trying to hide the cover, as he grabs the book, shoves his confused machine back into his locker, and suddenly stands, with his back to his locker, in an overly casual position, like The Thinking Man statue.

He chuckles, a bit mellow-goofily, at a few girls who walk by together, smiling at him curiously-- and looking him up and down, giving him the once-over.

One girl even winks at him flirtatiously. He just nods and waves back, like a friendly neighbor, either totally aloof to her advances, or too distracted by his quirked-out invention drama, to notice that she's hitting on him. She looks abruptly confused by this, and just keeps walking with her friends, lost in pondering bewilderment.

She even looks back at him 1 more time, to make sure she understood his response right. But she just sees him, still leaned back against his locker, with his arms folded, and his eyes glued onto the empty screen of the cell phone in his hands, as he pretends to read a text, until the area thins out. So the girl just looks back, forward, and continues on with her distracted, laughing friends, moving on.

As soon as the coast is clear of people, Skyler quickly reopens his locker, and holds his device back, from popping out in his face again, with the novel.

"Greetings, Skyler. Would you like to continue on to Chapter 12 of your--"

But Skyler muffles the speaker on the device with his hand, grabs a screwdriver from the magnetic blue pocket, on the inside wall of his locker door, and starts tweaking one of the nooks in his machine, as it moves and jerks around in his hands.

It sparks, shocking him. He yanks his hand back in fleeting pain, shakes his finger out, and sucks his fingertip briefly, to soothe it. Then he shakes it out again, goes back, and attempts to fix it once more, before he types something on his laptop.

"Auto Pop-out Mechanism Off", the machine assures him.

Skyler sighs, relieved, as the machine stops moving and jerking around, "Gotta tweak that auto mechanism."

Then he looks at the romance novel in his locker. He grabs it, hiding it from the view of others, and reads a quick line from it, out loud to himself, in a hushed tone.

“I want you to be my lover-- he said to her with a seductive gaze-- but in order for that to work-- I need you to be my friend-- *first...*”, Skyler looks up in thought at this, “That’s an *awesome* line. I have *got* to use that on a girl some day.”

Suddenly he feels a tapping on his shoulder, and he jumps up, abruptly startled, as he bumps into his locker door awkwardly, and drops his romance novel to the ground. He nervously and quickly picks his women’s fiction up from the floor, lunges it into his locker, and slams his locker door shut, to hide it, pretending to look casual again, as he looks to see who’s trying to get his attention. He assumes it’s one of his friends, but only Steven would be understanding about his reading material. And the only 1 of his friends who already knows the kind of stories he’s been reading is Zack, who-- while finding it rib-numbingly hilarious, was not exactly good at keeping his voice down. And would likely turn the whole thing into a publicly memorable fiasco Sky would never live down.

So Skyler is relieved to see that it’s not Zack, or *any* of his friends, at his locker. And he’s, instead, surprised to see who it actually is--

--Theresa.

Wait--

--Theresa?

His eyes have to wince and double take, a moment, to make sure they’re seeing correctly, as he looks forward, to see Theresa staring back at him.

And not in a good way.

To the contrary--

She looks neurotic.

And if the way she looked from a far, back in The Golden Hall Auditorium was bad-- seeing her up close-- was *SOOO* much worse:

Her clothes are wrinkled and ruffled, like she just dug them out of the laundry; totally uncharacteristic of Theresa. Her nails are jagged and choppy, as if she'd been biting them for um-teen days straight. Her eyes have the kind of bags under them, that you only see of people who haven't slept in weeks. And the way she keeps looking over her shoulder and twitching at the slightest sound or movement, makes her look like a crazed patient, who just escaped an insane asylum.

If Skyler didn't know any better-- just on instinct-- he might have laughed, thinking she was trying to be funny.

But Theresa was never funny.

And that freaked out look he saw on her face, back on the awards stage-- was very much real-- and not funny at all.

Luckily, for Skyler, knowing how to pretend a girl looks perfect, no matter how disheveled she looks, is a skill he learned quite quickly, from his growing years of young adult friendship, with moody Lissette. So Sky gulps at Theresa's appearance, but then immediately smiles big at her any way-- pretending she looks fantastic.

Then he gazes reminiscently at the blood red ribbon in her hair-- and gets a brief flash of something that he barely recalls ever feeling before. Something that surprises him...

--A positive memory with Theresa in it.

"Theresa!", he grins bright at her, "Heyyyyyy, youuuuu. So... Congrats on the award!"

Theresa skips right over the BS pleasantries and goes straight for the kill-- looking terrorized beyond all measure. Though at first she's confused. "Huh?"

Then she remembers what just happened, “Oh-- Yeah-- Thanks, Skyler.” She fluffs it off, “I-- We-- Can you keep a secret?”

Sky laughs curiously and shrugs, “Sure. Why? Did you and The Scooby Doo Nancy Drew Sherlock Holmes Crew find a new major mystery to solve?” He talks humorously-- charmingly-- like Scooby Doo, “Rut Row Raggy! Rut’ll ree dooooo!”

Theresa forces a fake, strained giggle, as if trying to keep up appearances and pretend they’re having a normal conversation-- like spies are watching her-- and then she informs him, through her gritting, smiling teeth.

“Yeah, we solved the case-- of a lifetime. Gonna shake the nation. But-- there’s a cover-up. We’re not sure how far up it goes. So-- I was wondering if,” She narrows her eyes at him, “If I can trust your Dad?”

Skyler stares at her with stunned eyes, now seriously concerned-- or at least curious, “Of course, Theresa. He’s not dirty. He’s good. What’s up? What’s wrong?” He eyes her closely.

“Um,” She looks nervous and unsure, but then gives in and hopes for the best, “I’m sorry I ignored you when we dated. I-- meant to thank you for that-- singing red stuffed toy bear you gave me. I still use him. And-- *Just remember: I have a bunch of those **hot red thangs**-- But real life pets --like **poodles**-- are even better.*” She stares at him intently, as if giving him a code.

Sky tries to, but for the life of him, he doesn’t get it-- and instead, looks woefully confused by her. Then he laughs incredulously, as if he just got a funny joke, in passing.

“You mean the stuffed toy I won you at that carnival, like, freshman year? I don’t even remember you *noticing* it, let alone *liking* it. Too busy starting your “Core 4” legacy, haha.” He shakes his head teasingly at her, “I admit, at the time, I was mad you abruptly put me on standby to make a fake detective agency...

“But now I see you did something special. That nobody else did. I’m proud of you Theresa. YOU 4--”, he chuckles as he mocks Principal Bellmont’s hyper cheerleading disposition of hope, “*Are the heroes we been waiting for!*”

Skyler rocks a humorously corny “Way To Go” arm, with a goofy smile. But Theresa just sniffs back tears, nodding.

“Yeah, um-- I wish I hadn’t done it-- *now*. I-- I’ll call you after school.”

She looks around, distracted. Sky touches her arm, and she jumps-- jittery, staring back at him-- frantic. He realizes how severely disturbed she is and looks sympathetic-- and sincerely worried about her.

“Hey-- Are-- Are you OK, Theresa? Maybe-- you should just tell me now--”

“I-- No-- NO! I’m being watched...” Theresa almost freaks out, into a total meltdown, right in front of him.

“Watched? What? By who? *Who*’s watching you?”

Skyler is seriously concerned now, as Theresa shakes in panic. He steps closer, to comfort her, as he glances around the halls suspiciously. Then he notices the gold crosses on her red hair ribbon. For some reason, this both pleasantly surprises him-- and makes him curious. At the same time, Theresa’s eyes fall on Sky’s long, stained, old, white-flaked, wooden Cross key chain, as it swings from his pocket. Then Sky sees Theresa open her mouth tentatively, looking down, as if she’s about to speak.

But suddenly, attractive-faced, athletic-bodied, 18-year-old, Laura London, RAGES down the hall, screaming bloody murder, as she explodes past her curious, timid peers, in her red, white and gold, 1-piece school swimsuit, covered only by a big, thick stark white towel, wrapped around her waist-- and embroidered with the golden eagle school crest on it.

With her big, curly, shoulder length, fiery red hair, and a boyishly thin frame with very little chest, to Sky, Laura looks like a walking talking beanpole sprouting an explosive spectacle of brilliant bright fireworks, at the top of her head-- like a 4th of July sparkler.

Or an emergency flare gun.

She was memorably cute, which is why Sky could see why Zack liked her. But Skyler was more hypnotized and easily consumed by girls with more womanly bodies. Because he found the femininely curvaceous features of more full-bodied, buxom females more attractive-- which Skyler thought was a good thing, because it usually meant that he and Zack never liked the same girls, as they had totally different tastes.

Framed between the glassy, dark, crimson-red marble floor, and an awesomely high, diamond-white ceiling, Laura thunders down their deep, golden-yellow walled corridor, waving a sporty blue top in her hand like a war flag.

"AAGGGHHH! THAT'S *IT!* *WHO* KEEPS STINK BOMBING MY *LOCKER?! I WILL KILL YOU! I WILL EFFING KILL YOU!*" She roars.

Zack looks up from his locker, standing next to Hadji, and across the hall from Skyler and Theresa, to laugh hysterically, as Nathan and Steven watch from further down the hall together, by Steven's locker. He shouts at Laura--

"God you're sexy when you're mad, Lifeguard Laura! All that fiery red hair flaming-- Rage on, girl! In your school pool swimsuit and towel--"

"*SHUT THE HELL UP ZACK!*" *She barks at him.*

"I know that means you love me!" He shoots back with an unstoppable boyish grin.

Pissed off Laura just punches a locker, leaving an indent in it, and screams down the hall, as people flee from her path. Skyler can't help but chuckle at the comical scene.

Then he turns to see if Theresa's laughing too-- but she's gone. He frowns, unsure if Theresa would really just leave like that, without saying anything. Especially after all the troublesome things she just said.

--And *didn't* say.

Sky looks around quickly. He checks back inside the classroom. Then he looks around the corner, in the hall. But still-- he can't find her.

So, looking troubled--

--Skyler leaves.

CHAPTER

[5]

MEET THE DANGEROUS MYSTERY

Twinkling, bright, diamond stars decorate the midnight blue, evening sky, as it pours down sheet after sheet of hard rain, onto Skyler's upper middle class home.

The crisp green lawn is cut and edged. The driveway is lined perfectly with identical solar lights, that cast a mysterious candescent ray of recycled sunlight onto the neatly paved area. And the house is dignified, with 2 Greek, white, stone pillars, that introduce the big, simplistically designed, white, wood-imitating steel front door, as they hold up a terrace for the 2nd story up above.

Everything looks in place-- but there's something missing about the house. There are no flowers. No floral seat cushions on the front stoop bench. No pink wind chimes. No heart-decor bird feeders. No homey, domestic door mat, to wipe your feet on-- with welcoming words of sweet love in the inferred open warmth of hugging arms on it.

Yes-- There was something missing about Skyler's home.

It wasn't money.

It wasn't class.

It wasn't the conveniences of modern day technology.

--It was a woman's touch.
And it was visible...
...even from the outside.

Inside Skyler's big psychedelic game room, the steamy, salty scent of hot pizza and potato chips permeates the garage-turned-den-slash-laundry-room, as the low buzz of the white wall AC hums softly, blowing cool air out, below the window.

Sky blindly agitates his verbally loud and victory-obsessed gaming partner, Hadji, every time he compulsively checks his cell phone for any hint of a message from Theresa-- which is a seriously concerning matter in Skyler's mind-- but nothing more than a silly distraction in the mind of Hadji-- who knows it will block them from winning the hard-fought video battle that they're playing against Zack and Steven.

Zack, Steven and Hadji's fingers move with lightning speed across all the hard plastic buttons, bedecking the fat black gaming console controllers, that are gripped tightly within their tense, aggressive hands, as their focused eyes dart all around, following every micro move that their giant avatars make, on the giant TV screen, that sits beside the black gaming console, to which the long black wires of their game controllers lead.

But Skyler is a bit slower than his fellow digital warriors, who remark either humorously and favorably (Zack and Steven) or hostilely and wildly (Hadji) at him, whenever he loses a point-- or a life-- for his and Hadji's team.

Skyler doesn't care though.

They've played this game countless times before, and though he always found it pleasantly fun to compete, and get off some steam with his friends, he was starting to get bored with the pointless repetition of it. Especially when he had unique and important personal projects he needed to finish, waiting for him upstairs, in his bedroom.

But Sky knew all these games were the life-- bloodline-- glue that kept his friends so closely bonded together every day for years-- so he would never deprive them of his friendly participation in it.

Behind Skyler, Zack, Steven and Hadji-- Lissette holds her smooth, sheeny, pool stick steady, as she cautiously stares at the thick, multicolored, numbered balls, scattered all over the redwood-framed, forest green billiards table.

Nathan watches the tip of her long, thin, beige, and colorfully designed stick, carefully, as he sits, peacefully composed, in his electric wheelchair, still with a bluetooth in his ear and an oxygen tube up his nose-- a humorously odd combination that Skyler always found amusingly paradoxical.

Sky's shaggy black and white snow dog, Einstein, meanders about, wagging his tail excitedly, and puppy-smiling at them all, with his stunning electric blue eyes and his soft coat of cookies and cream fur.

He pants sloppily, holding a big red ball in his mouth, as he looks for someone to play with. Everyone pets the perky pooch, but are all too distracted by their gaming, chatting or dorky trash talking, to toss the ball for him. So he just lays beside Skyler and watches them all play their human games, smelling like pizza and dirt.

A dramatic, glow-in-the-dark, Gothic white Cross is painted brightly, between other colorful, neon, black-light reflective, graffiti street art, on the center wall, behind the busy billiards game table. All the walls of the game room are decorated with funky, dazzling, youthfully spray painted designs. Left of the funky giant neon-white Cross, is a funky giant neon-orange heart, and to the right of it-- a funky giant neon-yellow smiley face. They all look different, as if painted by different artists, but they all look alive-- like something inside them is alight with a spark of energy.

The heart is beating.
The face is seeing.
And the Cross is breathing.
It's both beautiful and creepy at the same time.
But on the surface--
It's mostly just fun and entertaining.

The ceiling is white and sparkly, as the floor is light and soft-hued, with subtly muted white, pink and gray pastels swirling around inside the giant tropical tiles.

In addition to the big black and silver video game station and billiards table, stands a black fold-out card table, off to the side, by a secluded corner, toward the white wood door, with boxes of board and card games on top of it. Peppered between the video games, billiards table, and card game table, are a wooden foosball table. It's lined with a small string of Christmas lights around it-- and an electric white and blue air hockey table that doubles as a ping pong / tennis table.

In another corner is a black mini fridge with a pack of bottled water atop it, next to a snack bar with a neon blue laptop sitting on it. Funky, electronic, bass dropping, glow-stick-break-dance music echoes out of the big, old speakers, lining each corner wall of the room.

A wobbly dubstep remix of the scream-accented 'Chrispy' Halloween horror movie theme score ends, as the wobbly 'Brostep' dubstep remix of the Star Wars Imperial March movie theme score begins, from the neon blue laptop, that sits across from a giant, bag-lined, stainless steel trash can and an industrial stainless steel washer and dryer, in the corner alcove, farthest back from all the fun, festive activities.

Lining the walls opposite of the game tables, are some giant, beat up, mismatched, wrinkled, gray, pleather recliners, and flat, fabric-made, tropical, yellow sofas, that Skyler found for free on Craigslist. He had to fix up the springs to make the pull-out beds work for their occasional sleepovers, but all-in-all-- they were perfect for the game room-- and a killer steal.

The cool, pale, cream-swirled floor is littered with empty pizza boxes, half-eaten bags of store brand potato chips, Zack's brand new brown sandals, and Einstein's various doggy toys and chew sticks, as Skyler, Hadji, Zack and Steven sit on colorful, cushiony, black light reflective bean bags.

Skyler's is neon blue, Hadji's neon yellow, Zack's neon orange, and Steven's neon green. The neon violet and white bean bags, in the set, sit off to the side, between the couches and lounge chairs.

Everyone, but Hadji and Nathan, has sprung quickly out of their confining conformist costumes, dictated to them by the academy, in exchange for their "individual" styles of free-form.

Sky wears his scratched up, deep black, military-style hiking boots, with loose, long black jeans, and a blood red T-shirt, that displays the golden colored words: "Wouldn't you like to know?", in thick, haunting, Gothic font. In addition to that, of course, are his black and neon-orange motorcycle sunglasses, perched comfortably on top of his forehead, and his hallmark-- the big, aged, smudged, slightly discolored, white-peeled, wooden Cross, that dangles down, out of his pocket, from his motorcycle key chain.

Zack wears his new white socks, with loose, long white jeans, and a sky blue T-shirt, that displays the silver words: "Roses are red, Violets are blue, Just make out with me, And I'll pay your bills too. -- So we can stop with all this annoying poetry crap"-- The top 2 poetry lines are in scripted font, and the rest of the statement is in thick, goofy, comic sans font.

Steven wears his weathered white and blue sneakers, with skinny, long blue jeans, and a dark gray shirt, that displays the white words: “top choice”, in thin, plain, Ariel font.

Lisette wears her shiny, strappy, black wedge sandals, with tight, short, red jeans shorts, and a blood red, spaghetti-string top, displaying the black, glam-stoned words: “Hot Chic”, in thin, elegant, scripted font. Her hair is pinned up in a messy bun, to get it out of her face, so she can play the game-- revealing her blingy silver Cross earrings that dangle from her ears. Skyler can smell the stinging alcohol scent from Lisette’s choking “Seduction” perfume-- in every part of the room.

It’s giving everyone a headache.

But no one has the guts to tell her.

Except for maybe Zack-- if he noticed it.

Which he doesn’t.

As usual, Sky always found it psychologically profound, how Zack and Lisette-- and most of their generation-- were all so rebellious about wearing school uniforms every day, and yet when he stood back and took a look at how most of them dressed when they had a choice, in their free time, he realized that they were all still conforming to some sort of uniformed pattern that matched each other, in some way.

Did their school dress code subconsciously train them all to visually team up in fashionable solidarity?

Or did the commercial power of their media-manufactured society, that subliminally puppeted their every move, do it?

Skyler often kept these kind of intellectual, psycho-analyzing thoughts to himself. Because he knew from experience that they would go completely over everyone’s heads. Except for maybe Steven’s. He sometimes caught on to Skyler’s vibes of sociological and existential philosophy-- *sometimes*.

When Steven wasn’t thinking about Lisette.

Hadji and Nathan still wear their school uniforms. Nathan-- because it's easier than to go through the stress of changing, just to get back into his wheelchair-- and Hadji-- because who cares about what you wear-- when life revolves around video gaming?

However, Nathan has removed his bow tie and blazer, and unbuttoned the top of his shirt, just as Hadji has removed his tie and blazer, and fully unbuttoned his shirt, to reveal his white undershirt, in addition to rolling up his sleeves and pulling his outer shirt over his now un-belted pants.

It's Nathan's turn to hit a ball, but his shot is all the way around, on the opposite side. So he wheels his squeaky wheelchair loudly, around the pool table, to get into a more winning position. But his squealing wheels annoy the crap out of Zack.

"Nathan-- Dude-- Seriously-- *When* are you gonna get a new wheelchair? Every time it rains, that thing squeaks like nails on a chalkboard. And it like-- *JUST* started raining!"

As much as Skyler-- and everyone else in The Geek Night Crew-- didn't want to admit it to Nathan-- Zack had a point. The uniquely squeaky, high-pitched sound of Nathan's wheelchair, was infamous among the group. And at times--

--*It was unbearable.*

"Careful-- Nathan's tougher than he looks", Hadji jokes, "You tell him one bad yo-mama joke, and you might get cut on the sharp edge of his 'uniquely squeaky' wheelchair-- like I did." His focused eyes stay glued to the gaming screen, as he holds up his arm, to reveal the old, congealed blood, of a sharp cut across it, "--Battle scars, bruh."

Zack chuckles with Hadji, but Nathan suddenly looks ghostly pale with embarrassment, and deeply devastated by being the butt of their joke-- as if his mind has just been transported to another place and time. Then he snaps out of it, like it's all good, and he rolls his eyes at Zack, as if trying to hide his helpless feelings of hurt and humiliation.

“Sorry my being the victim,” Nathan takes a deep, labored breath, “Of selfish reckless drunk drivers--”, he takes a deep, labored breath, “Is such a burden on you Zack,” he takes a deep, labored breath, “But much like me,” he takes a deep, labored breath, “My chair’s allergic to water.” He takes a deep, labored breath, “However, I will try,” he takes a deep, labored breath, “--to oil it down for you,” he takes a deep, labored breath, “Your Mighty Highness,” he takes a deep, labored breath.

“Great! Thanks!” Aloof Zack is completely insensitive to Nathan’s sarcastic lament, as he stays fixated on his video game with the guys, distracted by his on-screen avatar.

Lissette realizes this and stops taking her billiards ball shot, with the pool stick still in her hand, to shoot Zack a dirty, disbelieving look, as she shakes her head at his unsympathetic self-absorption. Even Steven looks over at Zack incredulously, then redirects his eyes back to their video game.

As usual, Hadji is completely consumed in the game, and totally impervious to any and all worlds of drama coexisting outside of it, while a more urgently preoccupied Skyler keeps looking at his phone.

Waiting.

Hoping.

Willing it to ring.

Ring... --Just ring... --Why won't you RING??!

He stares life into his phone, until finally--

It rings.

Sky sees Theresa’s name flash across the screen, as his phone sings the instrumental dubstep remix of the famous, creepy, Halloween horror movie theme. He instantly drops his game controller, to answer his phone, standing up, as he quickly puts it to his ear.

Hadji flips out like they’re at war, “DUDE! WHAT THE *HELL?* YOU’RE GONNA MAKE US *LOSE* TO ZACK AND STEVEN!”

“Hello?” Hadji doesn’t even register on Sky’s radar, as he waits on baited breath to hear Theresa’s voice-- hopefully with an explanation for their bizarre encounter with each other, earlier that day, at school.

Zack glances at Sky and nods teasingly at him, nudging Hadji and Steven, “Somebody’s got a girlfriend, heheh.”

Lisette abruptly looks up from the pool table, toward Zack, and then quickly navigates her eyes onto Sky, curiously watching him pace around the room, both of them with pensive concentration.

Her on him--

--And him on the phone.

“Something you’ll never know.” Steven smirks flatly.

“Hey! We’re on the same team!” Zack looks genuinely surprised at Steven’s dig.

Steven rolls his eyes, as Skyler glides to a quiet corner in the room, plugging his phone-free ear up with his index finger. Nathan wonders why Lisette hasn’t taken her shot on the billiards table yet, and looks up at her, to see her eying Sky intensely. Nathan looks at Skyler, then back at Lisette, curiously.

“Hello? Theresa? Hello?”

Sky hears static, muffled talking, and giggling. He looks at his phone to make sure Theresa is the caller. Sure enough, it’s Theresa’s name he sees on his phone. He thinks about this for a quick moment, and then glides over to the snack bar, plugs his phone into his neon-blue-covered Mac laptop, with a creamy white cord, and types up a storm on his lit-up keyboard, as the screen reads, “recording audio for analysis” with visual frequency waves pulsating up and down in funky purple, orange, green, yellow, blue and pale red.

He listens to the phone again.

He hears more muffled talking, as Hadji shouts angrily, throwing down his controller, followed by Zack, who raises his fists triumphantly, and Steven, who smirks proudly.

Lisette suddenly pops up behind Sky, growling briskly in his ear.
“Hadji lost.”

“Hmm?” Sky jumps, startled, “Oh-- Aw, I’m sorry Hadji--”

Sky gets up and goes over to Hadji, feigning sorrow, as he pats crestfallen Hadji on the back, and cheerfully cocky Zack showboats like he’s the master of the universe. Hadji shakes his head furiously at the loss, as Steven picks up a pool stick, mumbling something to Nathan that makes Nathan crack up laughing.

Lisette suspiciously eyes Skyler’s phone, sees Theresa’s name on it, and puts the phone to her ear. She hears a scream-- and then a splash. She looks at the phone with a strangely haughty expression. Then she looks over at Sky. She sees Skyler fist bump a bummed out Hadji, apologetically.

Then she discretely sets Skyler’s laptop display to “sleep mode”, walks over to the boys, grabs a controller, plops down into Steven’s neon green bean bag, and offers a controller to Sky. Skyler glances back at his laptop, and sees that it’s dark-- asleep. So he shrugs to himself, grabs the controller from her-- and sits down to play a brand new game with Hadji, Lisette and Zack.

IT’S THURSDAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-JUSTICE DAY #4)--
and the morning bell rings loudly, at Secret Ridge Christian High School, as the crimson red, white and gold uniformed class of seniors finish pouring into history class.

Much like all the other classrooms in school, this room, with its dark red floor, stark white ceiling, and golden yellow walls, is simpler than other areas of the school, with merely a tall dark gray stone statue of a Native American Indian owning one corner, and a golden brown map on the wall across from it, with lines drawn all over it, from every student’s name at the top, tracing what region of the planet that their heritage traces back to, to give the room any special ambiance.

Other than that, it's just another classroom, with 20 or so students' smaller beige wood desks, the teacher's big dark wood desk, and the green chalkboard on the wall at the front.

Standard.

Zack, Nathan, Lissette, Steven and Hadji sit around Skyler, in the back; Nathan with the bluetooth in his ear and oxygen tube up his nose. Still with his signature black and neon-orange sunglasses atop his head, Sky notices four empty seats up ahead of them, at the front of the class, as he hands a plastic bag with men's sandals in it, to Zack.

"You left your shoes at my house-- again. Seriously, Zack. How do you go somewhere-- with only one pair of shoes, and then leave, without *ANY*?"

"I have comfortable socks." Zack shrugs laughingly.

"More comfortable than slip-on sandals?" Skyler smirks with him, shaking his head, amused but advising, "You know sandals on socks is a turn off to the ladies, right?"

Zack clasps his hands together and wraps them behind his head, leaning back with a jovial grin, "They'll learn to love it. Tis an acquired taste, of only the finest gentlemen, good sir."

They chuckle boyishly with each other as their teacher, Mr. Skitz, slowly trudges into the classroom, looking weary and watery-eyed. Skitz nervously rubs the dark, wooden Cross-Crucifix, that hangs from the Catholic prayer beads, in his shaking hands, while the tousled graying hair on his balding head, only accents the ghostly look of disoriented loss in his blood-drained face.

He anxiously does the 4 point Cross gesture up, down, right, and left, in a quiet prayer-- then he grabs a tissue from the box on his desk, blows his nose, clears his throat, readjusts his silver half-moon spectacles, and gazes woefully at the class.

"Sshh. Class--" His voice is so broken and weak, not even Skyler notices him speaking-- until he coughs, and tries again.

“CLASS-- Listen-- CLASS--”

Various students sshh their fellow classmates as they all stop talking, and look up at attention to Mr. Skitz. He gazes back at them, looking sickly, like a ghost. Skyler and a few others wonder why he came to class with such an obvious cold. *Did he want to suffer worse, spread it around, and get everyone else sick too?* Skyler half-laughs to himself, in head-shaking thought.

Then-- he declares it.

“We have a devastating announcement this morning.”

Mr. Skitz glances in palpable torment, at the 4 empty seats in the front of the class. He cringes his eyes shut, dropping his face down in pain. Then he looks back up at his quizzical class, takes a breath-- and he says the unthinkable.

“It--” He sighs unbearably, “It appears that--” He gulps, “Our school heroes--” His breath flutters, “Nelson Hart, Mary Meeks, Abraham Davis and, Theresa Thompson, of The Core 4 Truth Sleuths-- have committed-- *suicide*, in some kind of, *suicide pact*, late last night, in the school swimming pool.”

And suddenly--

--Skyler’s heart stops.

.....

ACT I: PART 2 - THE SECRET COMPARTMENT

.....

CHAPTER

[6]

MEET THE CORE 4'S COVER-UP

We-- we don't have any other information for you. Just-- We understand if-- if anyone needs to-- go home for the day. To grieve, and--" Mr. Skitz started. But Skyler couldn't hear anything past, "Theresa Thompson committed suicide last night".

Suicide?

What?

Of course not.

Obviously there's some sort of mistake.

He's mistaken.

That's just not possible.

This is a mistake.

Everyone gasps in shock, horror and a mixture of tearful shrieks and scoffing disbelief. Skyler looks up at his teacher in grim defiance, as the man's voice shakes and cracks, choked up.

"What? That-- That's impossible. I-- I just spoke to her. Yesterday. She called me. She-- She was scared, not suicidal. She can't be-- *dead*. She's alive. She was just-- *alive*."

Mr. Skitz's weepy eyes suddenly flit urgently into Skyler's protesting ones, "Mr. Stone. If you have any information that could be helpful to the investigation, I implore you to tell your Father. He's head detective on this case.

"SHE'S NOT DEAD!" Skyler snaps angrily at him.

"Skyler--" High-strung Mr. Skitz snaps back at him, just as upset, "I just saw her dead body, with all the others, over by the swimming pool, where your Dad is *right now!*"

Now the whole class gasps in horrified shock and gruesome curiosity. Mr. Skitz closes his eyes, exhaling, as he realizes that he just said something he shouldn't have. Skyler's eyes widen in rebellious incredulity, then he jumps up out of his seat, and races out of the classroom.

"No-- Mr. Stone-- Skyler-- Sky!"

Mr. Skitz tries and fails to stop Skyler, then sighs at his departure, and opens his mouth to speak to the rest of the class. But Sky's friends-- Zack, Lissette, Steven, Hadji, and Nathan, all jump up and follow after Sky-- followed almost instantly by the rest of the whole class.

Upset Mr. Skitz gestures and voices for them to stop, but ends up just grunting and throwing his hands up, exasperated-- as his entire class marches out of his classroom, and stampedes over to the crime scene at their school, to see if their 4 prized classmates really are, in deed, in the swimming pool--

And really are, in deed--

Dead.

Skyler blindly runs past a police door guard, who's distracted by his conversation with another cop, and charges into the dauntingly big, 50 foot tall swimming pool room, as his friends and classmates follow closely behind him.

The maroon-stained, red, white and gold tile and concrete floor, surrounding the 30 foot deep Olympian swimming pool, is covered with yellow crime scene tape everywhere, as a team of professionals, covered from head to toe in white plastic forensics suits, drain the reddish pool.

Police stand by, on guard, everywhere-- some talking to each other-- others watching the FBI agents, investigators, and forensics team do their work.

Bombarded by the new element of chaotic energy and dark tragedy in their swimming chamber, Skyler stops short to take it all in-- and starts to scan the room for Theresa, or his Dad-- or *anyone* who can make any of this make any sense to him. But before he can even levy a thought-- or cast a receptive glance to process this new information, a police officer immediately jumps over to block him. Skyler's friends and entire class jog up behind Sky, as the cop pushes him back.

"Let me in! Where's my Dad?? Dad!"

Deeply encumbered Detective Sirius Stone looks up from his discussion with a profoundly dazed-looking Principal Bellmont, just in time to see the entire police squad gang up on Skyler, and tackle him to the ground, drawing their handguns on him.

The swarm of cops recklessly dig their knees into Sky and his key chain, pinning his white wooden Cross to the ground by his hand, as the weight of 1 cops' knees jabs Sky's black and neon-orange motorcycle sunglasses into his head.

“MY CROSS!” Skyler chokes out, “DON’T BREAK MY CROSS!” He coughs, but his voice is clipped, as the officers’ collective body weight on him, restricts his oxygen.

All of Skyler’s friends and classmates gasp and scream in freaked out, terrified horror, anticipating the worst, and yelling for the cops to stop, as other police hold them back. Detective Stone immediately darts over, waving his hands at them, as Bellmont is mid-sentence, in discussion with him.

“HEY! DON’T SHOOT! THAT’S MY SON! DON’T SHOOT! HEY! PUT YOUR GUNS AWAY AND GET YOUR DAMN KNEES OFF MY SON’S NECK! YOU’RE *CHOKING* HIM!”

The cops see the Detective, and slowly lower their firearms, finally getting off of Skyler’s neck. Dad helps his bleeding son limp up, and steps in front of Skyler, who coughs profusely, checking on his Cross key chain, to make sure it’s OK, as he readjusts his sunglasses, and holds his body in pain. --Both the pain of being choked, bloodied, bruised and debased, by a pack of armed hard bodies in uniform--

And the pain of feeling betrayed by the very people he trusted-- who, for the first time in his life, just made him feel like a hardened criminal--

--Like an enemy of the state.

Skyler’s Dad eyes the cops in stunned horror, like they’re all fugly space aliens, “What the hell is wrong with you?” He can’t believe he has to tell them this, “He is a kid. These are kids. You are at a school-- and a crime scene-- of kids.”

He stares at them all like they’re all insane, “Innocent students just wanna see their dead friends, and ya-- you-- tackle them to the ground like terrorists? Choking them by the neck like rabid animals? Guns drawn to shoot them down like-- like violent, armed felons?”

His eyes fall on Officer Slager, an ecru-hued man of around his height, though no taller, who is muscularly built, but only just-- like a typical guy, who just works out regularly, to be at fighting power-- not a bodybuilder. He stares back at Stone with his cold, pallid gray eyes, so icy and dead-- they could turn hot lava into an arctic glacier.

"Sorry, sir. He looked dangerous." His words are polite-- but his eyes-- There's something wrong with his eyes. It's not that they look murderous-- which they do. And it's not that they look vicious-- which they do. But they look-- *empty*. Like there's something *missing* from his eyes--

--*A soul*.

Detective Stone is either deafly unaware of this man's hellishly scary, frozen, killer death vibe-- or he's doing an Oscar-worthy great job, pretending it doesn't bother him. --Because he just spits fire in Slager's face, like he's not the least bit afraid of him-- unlike Skyler, who stares quietly at the man, like he can sense all of the innocent souls, that this shell of soul-- has damaged. And violated.

--*And ended*.

"How??" Detective Stone barks back at him, "How did he look *dangerous* to you? Was it his prep school uniform or baby face that scared you? Maybe it was the tears in his eyes that had you shaking in your boots?"

As Detective Stone glares in awe at Slager, Skyler's thought abruptly shifts from Slager, to himself, in a moment of unexpected self-consciousness, as he rubs his face, looks at his fist, and realizes that, sure enough, there are tears there. He looks surprised at his own lack of biological control, as the cops all eye each other, then his Dad, and then they just shrug dumbly at his Father.

"We didn't know he was yours." Slager smiles pretentiously.

"No-- You didn't know that your job is to serve and protect-- not abuse and humiliate. Next time-- I'll have your badges."

Detective Stone glares honest daggers into Slager.

But Slager's eyes carry nuclear bombs-- hidden in a soft bouquet of sweet-smelling roses-- held by a young child. That was how deceptively deadly his eyes and voice spoke. Some of the cops gulp, looking to Officer Slager for direction. He looks murderously at Detective Stone, then at Skyler, and then back at Detective Stone.

"I'd be careful with my son, if I were you, Sirius. You already lost your namesake. Ya don't wanna lose your little killah here too. What with all of his... somnambulistically dangerous activities-- and what not. Someone of his hue could easily be mistaken for a common criminal on the street." Slager narrows his eyes at Detective Stone, "You'd be surprised how easy those mistakes can happen."

Skyler furrows his brow in suddenly distracted confusion, as his mind works overtime, trying to understand Slager's perplexedly odd choice of words.

All of his somnambulistically dangerous activities?

What activities?

What was dangerous?

What the heck does "somnambulistically" mean?

And why did he refer to Skyler as "your little killah"?

Racist, Sky scoffs, shaking his head angrily to himself.

Detective Stone glares murderously back at Officer Slager, and steps up to him, intimidatingly, "Are you threatening-- a Lieutenant, Officer Slager?"

Haughty Slager smirks, "All due respect, "*Lieutenant*"-- but we're friends with-- "*The Sheriff*".

With his blood boiling high, Detective Stone studies him sharply, "Oh-- well-- *all due respect*, "officer"-- but I'm friends with the police *marshal, the governor, the FBI, and all of your unseen enemies*. So if anything happens to my son-- we can wipe every man in your family off the map. And all your friends will go down with you."

“Are you threatening-- a fellow servant of the law, Detective?”
Slager mocks him.

Detective Stone notices a black, upside down, Cross chain, hidden discretely around Slager’s neck. It must have been tussled up to the visible surface, during the cops’ abusive gang swarm on Skyler.

Suddenly, Detective Stone’s face changes, and he relaxes -- knowingly --with this new information. Calculating it, he switches up his demeanor a bit, pulling his shoulders back, with high brow intelligence, and child-like confidence-- like someone filled with above-it-all faith-- instead of leaning forward, with threatening aggression, and parent-like fury-- like someone filled with the screw-it-all, defensive, “Don’t F*** With My Kid”, baby cub protectiveness of a Dad-- ready to throw down for his son, like Mustafa for Simba--

The latter, of which, is much truer to how he really feels inside.

But he plays along with the rules of psychology any way.

“I would be.” He preaches to Slager, “If you were of the law.” He glances around at all the anxiously unsure cops watching them closely, “And I dunno what secret racket you got goin’ on here, Slager.” He nods at all the guys who stand around staring at them, “But know this.” He stares proudly into Slager’s eyes, “Monsters never reign forever. Eventually they all go down. Team Good always wins the final battle. David beat Goliath to the ground.”

Both Detective Stone and Skyler watch and notice, as Officer Slager twitches with an unnerved sneer.

“Oh yeah? Well I’ll be looking forward to seeing that happen-- STONE.”

“Oh yeah? Well I’ll be shaking my head at you in grave disappointment when it does-- SLAGER.” He mocks him,

“And then-- after I smile in righteous anger, at the justice you receive, for your epic fall from grace, I’m gonna head-butt the crap out of you, punch you with a sharp undercut, that pops your lying jaw out of place, and watch you whimper in pain, in front of everybody, holding your bloody face, in humiliating agony, like the school bully, who just got shocked, when someone finally came out of nowhere-- and knocked him out on his ass.” He smiles tauntingly at him with intentionally crazy eyes.

Sky stands between his Dad and Officer Slager, watching them stare each other down, in tense silence, as members of the C.S.I. team finish-- CLICK CLICK-- brightly flashing photos of the crime scene behind them.

Slager eyes the cops-- then he eyes Stone, “As I said. Didn’t know he was yours. Now we know. *WE*-- won’t touch him.”

Officer Slager nods at his fellow cops, to follow him out --and they do --pushing all the other teens out of the entrance to the room. Lissette watches Skyler a little too keenly, as she, Zack, Steven, Hadji, and Nathan all leave the pool room, with their classmates.

Detective Stone looks down, thinking, as if he knows Skyler is still in real danger. Agent Diaz gives Sky some bottled water, patting his back as he coughs a bit more. Detective Stone turns to Skyler.

“YEAH! AND EVER HEARD THE CHATTER THAT BLACK LIVES MATTER?!” Sky shouts back after the cops, then rubs his neck, coughing, and looking down in pain, as he mumbles, “--*Prick*.”

Stone huffs gruffly at him, “Sky-- you are tall, Black and male. What are you doing upsetting the police? You know these guys are trigger-happy, and some of them are like rabid dogs. We had this talk when you were 6. Don’t run. Don’t talk back. Don’t hide your hands. No sudden movements. No hoodies. Just smile, nod, and say, “*yes sir*”.

Skyler shrugs angrily, “Not my fault I was born into a country with psycho-violent, high-strung, hotheaded, trigger-happy *cowards*, who sign up to be in law enforcement, then callously terrorize, or recklessly abuse, the very citizens we pay them to protect-- like a cult of artless bullies.” Then Skyler grimly remembers why he’s there, “Skitz-- Mr. Skitz-- He-- He just told us all that our friends-- they killed themselves? But-- that’s not possible. He’s wrong. I know he is. What really happened? Where-- Where is she?”

“Where is who, Skyler?”

Sky shoots his Dad a knowing look. Dad inadvertently glances past Skyler, then back at Sky, shaking his head. Skyler turns to see 4 bodies laid out next to each other on stretchers, by the pool. He sees Theresa’s gold-Cross-framed blood red hair ribbon, hanging down from one of them. He gasps with wide eyes.

“Theresa.”

“Skyler-- NO-- YOU--”

But Skyler runs over to the stretchers, as his Dad runs after him, and Sky rips off the sheet, to reveal a very dead, very drowned out looking Theresa-- with her eyes still open, and a lost look on her face.

“NOOOOO!!!!”

Sky shouts with a staggering roar of abrupt, refusing pain, and breaks down into horrified tears, as his mournful, but professional, Dad pulls him away. He bumps into the stretcher, making Theresa’s arm fall limply down from it. Skyler melts into grief, seeing a broken wine bottle and dark red stains on the ground.

“NO! NO! NO!”

“Skyler! I’m sorry! I’m sorry, son! I’m sorry-- C’m-- C’m-- now--”

Sky's Dad hugs him into submission, trying to pull his view off of the stretchers. But just as he does, Skyler notices the lipstick heart kiss print on Theresa's hand. Sky points at it, as he pulls away from his Dad, easing toward it.

"That-- That's a heart kiss-- That's-- That's the lipstick kiss of the Valentine Killer on her hand! That-- This-- wasn't suicide! This was... *murder!* They were murdered by The Valentine Killer! Dad! They were--"

Skyler's vociferous excitement warrants unfriendly glares from all the other crew and agents working the crime scene. They all throw Detective Stone irked stares, as if to say, "This has now become professionally intolerable and legally dangerous for us". Noticing this, Detective Stone clears his throat and pulls Skyler off to a quiet corner.

"Skyler-- Skyler-- SKY! --We found suicide letters on their computers-- with their hard drives wiped clean."

"Dad, you know Theresa didn't kill herself. And where's her Valentine?"

Dad nods, "I know. But the local PD ruled it a suicide before the rest of us even got here. And nobody had any Valentine Killer Cards. Just the pink rose petals."

Skyler thinks for a moment-- confused, pissed, and upset, "Dad, Theresa came to me yesterday after school-- I've never seen her so scared. She wanted to tell me about a big case Core 4 just solved that would shake the nation, and she didn't know who to trust, cause of a cover-up or something.

"But she was afraid *they* were watching her. Dad-- Is The Valentine Killer even real? Or just a made-up villain by some creative bad cops to deflect attention off them? Cause The Core 4 just got awarded for busting a school drug ring yesterday. --What if-- school wasn't the only place they found connected to that ring?"

His Dad looks thunderstruck and shakes his head at him, unnerved by this. Then he realizes, “Wait-- Theresa talked to you about this and you didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t-- I didn’t know she-- I--” Skyler is suddenly plagued with guilt-stricken pain, “Oh God-- I shoulda-- You’re right. I shoulda told you. I felt something in my gut and I ignored it. Now she’s-- Oh God-- I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault-- I’m so sorry--” Sky’s voice chokes up.

Dad hugs him-- fatherly-- trying to keep Sky calm, as he looks over at his colleagues, to make sure they’re not still unnerved by Sky, “It’s OK, Sky. It’s not your fault, son. You couldn’t have seen this coming. You couldn’t a stopped it.”

“But I could have. She was gonna call me after--” His eyes widen as he realizes, “Wait-- she *DID* call me-- By mistake --She --just didn’t know it.”

“When?” He pulls back, looking at Sky-- casually curious, but curious nonetheless.

“Yesterday, after school, when I had the gang over for Geek Nite in The Game Room. She-- Ho-- I, I recorded it! Last night-- The muffled talking. It’s being processed in my audio analyzer program right now!”

Detective Stone looks surprised at his son, “Wait-- the analyzer program-- you designed? That-- actually works?”

Detective Stone stands by a girl’s locker, eyeing the glittering, silver, fashion Cross sticker on it, with humorously butch befuddlement, as Skyler opens his own locker and pulls his laptop out, on his old, portable, high tech, mechanical tray device, that Sky invented freshman year.

Dad admires Sky's invention curiously, as Sky types lightning fast on his keyboard. A proud smile slowly sweeps his Dad's face, as he eyes his son's intricate machine handiwork. Then his eyes fall on Skyler's romance novel-- and his smile fades.

"That one of your romance novels?" He nods at Skyler, and then at the book.

"Hmm?" Skyler glances at his Father, as he types, and glances over at his book, "Oh. Yeah." He just covers his book with a notebook, and resumes typing, too distracted by his program, to notice his Dad's reaction.

"Why ya read those things?" Dad looks painfully puzzled at his son, as he types away on his laptop.

"Huh? Oh, ya know. To sharpen my finesse with the softer sex."

Dad eyes him carefully, "And by softer sex... you mean... --*girls*?"

"Uh huh." Sky just absentmindedly continues typing, eyes fixated on his screen.

"Uh huh." Dad stares at him, disbelievingly, thinks for a moment, and tries again, "Hey-- why don't I try to teach you how to play football again?"

"What?" Confused Sky continues typing on his laptop.

"Ya know. Show ya how to tackle without getting pummelled."

"I already know how to fight Dad. My lessons with--"

"Yeah yeah, I know. Your fancy martial arts stuff. But I'm talkin' gritty guy stuff."

"You taught me how to punch and fight the "gritty guy" way back when I was 7. And I don't get anything out of football. It's just a bunch of people getting together, to watch 2 groups of goofy-dressed dudes-- or dudettes-- fight over an odd-shaped ball for 2 hours. It's a waste of time, while lives coulda been saved. Plus I'm working on my inventions, school projects, training classes with Mentor Yogi, and game nights with my friends, so-- I'm swamped."

“Swamped. Right.” His Dad looks down, defeated, then glances back at the romance novel in Skyler’s locker, and just shakes his head to himself, looking down and away, with a silently pained expression of bleak reminiscence.

Finally Skyler stops typing, grins, and shows his Dad the laptop screen. “Yep! It works--” Skyler beams proudly, “See, Dad? I’m actually good at creating and building things. Still processing though. I just have to wait for--”

“Sky-- Just gimme the recording. I’ll have my *PAID* team go over the call and analyze the audio-- *PROFESSIONALLY*.”

“Dad-- I know I slacked on processor components, but it was just cause I could only afford to have either a slower quality processor, or a weaker quality analyzer. And since the whole point is to analyze audio better, that’s what I focused my money on. So it may be slower, but compared to what’s out there, it’s the highest quality audio analyzer on, or, well, *OFF*, the market.”

“Sky, I’m proud of you. Really. But the odds of you inventing something in your bedroom that’s better than what we pay *high-tech companies* to give us-- is slim to none. Unless you’re a genius. --With a pretty big piggy bank.”

“What about a middle class genius?”

“There is no middle class any more, Skyler. Just people 2 paychecks away from being rich or poor. And the middle class *technological* genius who plays saxophone, surveys people for his school paper, and follows the trippy hippy spiritualism of his weird martial arts instructor? Bit much, Sky-- Just gimme the flash drive.”

“I already emailed you the file.”

Stone chuckles at his son’s enthusiasm, “Doesn’t make you a genius, Sky.”

Sky stands tall, “I *am* a genius. One day you’ll come to terms with that riveting fact of life.”

“Right. Thanks, Sky. See ya at home.”

“What about the cops and the cover-ups?”

“Sky-- you watch too many movies. The average cop isn’t a criminal.”

“Is the average cop a racist?”

“Maybe. It’s a racist country. But ya can’t go around pointing fingers at cops. Some of those guys already have it out for you, because I didn’t let them-- “accidentally”-- murder you in front of all your classmates, earlier.”

“Criminal. And racist. But I like what you said to Slager about how, “*Monsters never reign forever. Eventually they all go down. Team Good always wins the final battle. David beat Goliath to the ground.*” I thought Mom and I were the only spiritual idealists of the family. I mean, from what --you told me about her.” Sky looks down in sad melancholy.

Dad groans, shaking his head. “Skyler-- Don’t-- That-- No. Wait now-- Don’t listen to me when I’m-- selling wolf tickets. I’m just tryna get inside Slager’s head to rattle him a bit. Plant a seed. Shake out some truth. Slager’s just very ideological. So that was me-- *getting under his skin*, not me-- *giving you life advice*. I *don’t* want you to go play hero like The Core 4 did. I want you alive. Ya hear?”

Sky opens his mouth to clarify but Dad cuts him off, “No Sky. I dunno what’s goin on here but you keep away from those cops. Both in body and in mind. Don’t talk TO, or ABOUT them. Something doesn’t feel right. So stay outta this-- And I’ll see you and the gang at dinner tonight. If I can get home. Now what’s the protocol if you get ambushed by some bad seeds?”

“Dad--”

“Skyler-- What’s the protocol?”

Sky sighs to himself, thinking this is totally unnecessary at his age. He needed this back when he was 6. Not 10 years later, at the strapping age of 16.

But he follows procedure, and answers his Dad any way.

“Hide my phone behind my back, and press any Emergency Speed Dial Text I can reach, that’s programmed into my phone.” He thinks, then he adds, “--Along with the tricked out addition of my map coordinates tracing app.

“Which I built, so that each Speed Dial Text sends someone I trust my exact location, with the words, “911! DANGER EMERGENCY SEND HELP NOW”, so that they don’t have to rely solely on the slow, outdated, dinosaur technology of our current emergency system, in order to trace the location of my text, and eventually get around to finding and saving me, from said theoretical peril, by which time it would probably be too late, and I would probably already be dead.”

“Right. Good. And who do you have programmed?”

“Dad--” Sky’s turning red with embarrassment now, as his peers pass by, wondering what’s going on.

“Skyler-- This is important.” His tone is serious.

Sky huffs, “--1 is for you, 2 is for Agent Diaz, 3 is for Officer Bob, 4 is for Mentor Yogi, 5 is for Zack, 6 is for Lissette, 7 is for Steven, 8 is for Nathan, 9 is for Hadji, 0 is for 911, and 11 is for all of the above.”

“Perfect.” His Dad nods at him.

“Dad, when am I even gonna need this-- “protocol”? I’m never alone, except for when I’m in my room, working on one of my projects. Other than that, I’m always with my friends or my mentor, or you and the lawful crew. So it’s kind of a pointless plan. I don’t need it any more.”

“You always need it-- cause I won’t always be around to protect you, son.”

Dark thoughts hit Sky, without his conscious permission--

Like you were when I was 6?

Kind of surprised by his own random spasm of repressed animus, and not fully remembering what it is, clearly, that his subconscious is referring to-- Skyler pushes the painful thought back down, and far away, reminding himself how that’s not fair, whatever it was that he was trying not to remember.

He was just doing his job.

He couldn’t control the free will of others.

He’s done more to look out for him than anyone in this world. No one has protected him more than his Father.

So let it go.

Let what go?

Skyler felt like he was intentionally forgetting the dark details of something that he hadn’t consciously scrutinized in a long time. He had merely focused on getting retribution for it. But he hadn’t actually thought about the actual thing he wanted retribution for, in the longest.

Skyler snaps out of his slight, weird little zone-out, as he realizes that he’s absentmindedly rubbing the Cross key chain, hanging from his pocket. He stops, and opens his mouth to speak again, but his Dad just shakes his head at him.

“Now you stay away from Slager and his cronies, son. Ya hear?”

Sky stares back at his Dad in hushed submission, familiar with this “Just go with it” routine of theirs. His Dad would often say something Skyler already thought, believed, or agreed with, but he’d say it with such force and conviction, like he just needed to hear Sky “go with it”, with a verbal confirmation of concession. As if they were on 2 different pages, when they weren’t.

In this case, Skyler was a fan of his Father's words to Slager, more in philosophical thought, than in practical action. He saw the disturbing look of callous darkness in Slager's eyes. The chilling evil in his gaze was not lost on Sky. NO-- Skyler was genuinely spooked by that guy-- and Sky had absolutely ZERO intention of coming anywhere within 10 miles of him-- or any of his, likely, equally psychotic friends.

ZERO.

But here his Dad is again, thinking-- or assuming-- that just because Skyler liked his verbal sentiment, that meant he was gonna go act on it.

No-- Sky was smarter than that.

But is that what "normal" teenage guys would do?

Skyler wonders if that's why his Dad was always misunderstanding him.

Does he just keep expecting Sky to act like him-- and do what he would've done, back when Dad was his age, Sky thinks.

Suddenly Skyler feels lightyears away from his Father, and wishes, even if just for a fleeting moment, that he could be more like him. So they could connect more and get along better. Or at least understand each other. But sometimes it was like they spoke 2 different languages.

Skyler Stone spoke Philosophical Idealistic Techno Geek.

Daddy Stone spoke Caveman.

Without a translation guide book to help them de-mystify one another-- very often, they found themselves stranded up a creek without a paddle-- communicatively speaking. They would both habitually read too far into some things, with each other-- and never far enough, into others.

Realizing that his Dad biasly mistaking Sky for himself at his age-- or the typical, average guy Sky's age-- was the closest Skyler would ever come to being like his Dad, and the closest his Dad would ever come to relating to him-- Skyler concedes to his Dad's blindly freaked out, parental prejudice-- and just nods begrudgingly to Detective Stone, as if to say, "Whatever you say, Dad."

Detective Stone nods bearishly at Skyler, relieved now, then pats Sky's shoulder, content with this, and walks on, down the hall, with the other agents and officers, who join him. Skyler sighs, and then eyes his laptop as it reads, "Continue Analyzing?". Sky looks up and watches his Dad walk off into the distance. Then he looks back down at his laptop--

And he clicks-- "Yes".

CHAPTER

[7]

MEET THERESA'S STEPMOM

Steven parks his beat up, copper brown station-wagon, at the curb of the pretty pastel yellow house, with the big pink rose garden out front. It sputters loudly with a big POPPING sound. Everyone absentmindedly jumps at the noise from his car backfiring-- both startled and accustomed to it.

Wearing his signature black and neon orange sunglasses, Skyler hops out of the passenger seat, while Zack pours out of the back seat and stretches his arms and torso, mouthing his typical yawn of easily bored A.D.D. restlessness, as he holds a giant dark brown oak basket full of different kinds of meats and cheeses, in one hand.

Lisette follows Zack out, as Hadji pushes their seat up and squeezes out of the 2nd back seat, to join them. He and Lisette then turn around and grab Nathan, who's still sitting in the 2nd backseat.

Lisette pulls Nathan's legs out toward her, and Nathan puts his arm around Hadji's shoulder as Hadji starts to pick him up. Steven climbs out of the driver seat and jogs to the back of the van to help Sky.

Skyler coughs, waving away thick, toxic-smelling fumes from Steven's exhaust. Sky pulls the back door of the van open, above his head, then he and Steven pull Nathan's wheelchair out, and wheel it around to the side of the van.

Skyler switches places with Lissette, to help Hadji lift Nathan into his wheelchair, as Steven and Lissette hold the wheelchair steady. Everybody helps Nathan into his wheelchair except for Zack-- who simply plops the meat basket into Nathan's lap, like he's nothing more than a shopping cart.

Nathan glares at him for a fleeting moment, then resumes his routine, adjusting the oxygen tube up his nose and the bluetooth in his ear, to feel more comfortable, as his friends stroll alongside him, onto the sidewalk, and toward the driveway. The motor of his electric chair purrs slightly, as he presses the button on his wheelchair arm, to wheel him forward automatically.

Steven cuts his eyes at Zack, sarcastically. "Thanks for all your help, Zack."

"No problem!" Zack grins cluelessly as he glances back at Nathan, then looks at his wheelchair as if seeing it for the first time, "Oh, nice Nathan. Ya cleaned up and shined down your wheelchair-- No more squeak to kill my hot game wit da ladies." Zack says humorously, as he pinches the top of his sleeves, slicks back his hair like a goofy playboy, and walks on.

Everyone else monitors Nathan's wellbeing, looking annoyed by Zack.

"Ya know, it just doesn't feel right--" Zack looks off in thought, "Core 4 being dead and all. Feels like we're in an alternate universe. Like we got trapped in the wrong one. Like on another earth, Theresa and The Truth Sleuth crew are all just fine, and somebody *else* is dead. Like maybe somebody we all cared *less* about."

“Who, like Nathan?” Steven smirks.

“Huh? We care about Nathan. Don’t we?” Zack is genuinely confused by Steven.

“Ya coulda fooled me.” Lissette rolls her eyes.

“Ya know that theory--” Zack shrugs, “like when you go back in time to save a life, and somebody else has to die in their place, in order to keep balance in the universe? That’s all I meant.”

“It’ll be one sad game night tonight.” Hadji shakes his head, looking down, trying to sound sad.

“Dude, really?” Skyler lifts his sunglasses up onto his head as he looks at Hadji, “--How can you think about gaming at a time like this?” Skyler eyes him, both surprised and amused.

“What?” Hadji shrugs, “Gaming is a completely healthy form of grieving. And I say we all need to use it as the very good coping mechanism that it is.”

“Hadji, is there ever a time when...”, Nathan takes a deep, labored breath, “You’re *NOT* thinking about gaming?”, he takes another deep, labored breath.

“It’s better than serial killing.” Hadji retorts cynically.

Everyone stops walking and looks dead at Hadji.

Hadji scoffs, “What? I happen to have quite the aggressive and competitive nature, much like the average member of my male species. It’s natural for us to need the stimulation of hunting living things, like the hunters we are biologically born to be. Gaming allows us to do so, in modern day civilization, without actually doing it in real life-- which could completely destroy our entire bubble society, and evolutionary progress in history.”

“So in other words--” Skyler smirks, “you’re really just hoping we resume our daily Geek Nite tonight in The Game Room.”

“Yeah basically.” Hadji nods shruggishly.

They all groan humorously at him, shaking their heads, rolling their eyes, as they stroll to the front door of the polite pastel yellow house.

Then suddenly, as his friends rib Hadji for his compulsive gaming obsession, Skyler hears the stirring sound of a haunting melody, from the most beautiful voice he's ever heard-- A hypnotising reverberation of a sweet, sultry tone.

And instantly--

--He's the obsessed one now.

Where is that beautiful sound coming from?

He must know.

Skyler looks around to find the owner of these enchanting vibrations, then glances over to his side--

And there she is.

The beautiful origin of those pure, captivating notes stands over by the sidewalk, wearing a pretty solid pink, off-the-shoulder summer sun dress, that flows in the breeze, and looks familiar to him-- reminding him of something he can't quite put his finger on...

Then he starts absentmindedly, and rhythmically, tapping his fingers on his white wooden Cross key chain, as it hangs from the pocket on the right side of his black jeans.

He surveys her from the bright pink flip flops on her feet to the white pearl necklace around her neck, and stares at the fresh pink rose in her big, bushy, dark brown, shoulder length, curly hair. She's near Sky's height, but a couple inches shorter, with smooth, caramel skin, dark puppy dog eyes, a cute nose, full lips and thick, voluptuous curves.

Skyler is hooked.

He wants to kiss her.

Badly.

But he can't.

She's too far away...

So he just watches her intensely, as she watches them anxiously. She firmly grips the sparkling pink leash in her soft, elegant hand, as she “casually” walks her curly, white, sparkling pink collared poodle, past the yellow house. She catches Sky’s glance, blushes with a pretty smile, flustered-- and then, she quickly looks away from him, hushing her song.

He smiles at her bashful, transparent attraction to him-- as he also, is transparently attracted to her-- and notices the glimmering silver Cross, dangling from the pearl charm bracelet on her wrist. He moves in closer, wanting to speak to her, from the porch of the house where he is standing-- but the front door opens.

A handsome woman with a tearful smile, pale skin, crow’s feet around her sapphire blue eyes, and a tied up bun full of faded blonde hair, with a scarce bit of silver strands laced through it, stands at the door. She wipes her dirty earth-stained gloved hands on her forest green gardener’s apron, atop a beige silk blouse and black pencil skirt, in black heels, and lifts the wide, round, floral pink and green gardener’s sun hat off of her eyes, as she wipes the brow of her dirt-soiled face, holding pruning sheers in her hand.

She gazes forlornly at Skyler and his friends, with red eyes and a wet face. They all grab the giant meat basket from Nathan’s lap and hold it up for her. Stunned Lissette watches the woman, with a guilty frown of unexpected pity.

“Hi, Mrs. Thompson.” Skyler tries to sound consoling, but somehow comes off as sounding remorseful, “We’re so sorry about your daughter-- Theresa. The Core 4 were... well-- They were the school heroes.”

Mrs. Thompson stares at them for a moment. Then she immediately breaks down into a very sobering fit of gut-wrenching sobs, and she swallows Skyler up into a massive hug.

He chokes slightly, at the abruptly tight embrace, falling backwards, and swiveling around a bit, as his friends scatter, to make room for them. Then Skyler notices the singing girl with the pink flower in her hair, as she watches them curiously from afar.

I must speak with her, he thinks. I have to meet her.

He nods at the girl, hoping that will make her feel welcome to come closer-- or at least not run away. But she does just that, and with a mere gasp at his gesture, Skyler's spellbinding songstress turns and speed-walks her dog away, in the opposite direction.

Sky timidly tries to break free from the grip of Theresa's Mom with a gentle, subtle pull away, to call the girl back-- but Mrs. Thompson is too bonded to him, as she clings tightly to his frame-- and Skyler is too courteous to upstage her grief, for an unrelated curiosity.

Realizing the woman's misery, and remembering why he's really there, he simply concedes, and tenderly hugs the wailing woman back, until she calms down.

Sky's friends shoot each other grimly knowing looks, as if to say, "We're in for a very difficult visit". Then they look at Sky. He shoots them a hesitant "Just go with it" look, over Mrs. Thompson's shoulder-- and suddenly-- for a brief moment-- he reminds himself of his Dad.

Theresa's livingroom is neat and minimalist, with a clinically white tiled floor to match the white walls, white ceiling, white ceiling fans, white leather furniture, and all of the white glass-door cabinets, filled with Mr. Thompson's glass figurine models of computer screens, computer modems, computer parts, wires, CDs, headphones, flash drives, etc.

Skyler stares at Mr. Thomson's various techno-shrines with a new pair of more matured eyes, never having noticed it all before. But now that he sees it all again, years later, he realizes just how cold, clinical, and creepy, Theresa's home really made him feel.

Then Sky remembers when he was 8, riding in the new family car, to the grocery store, with his Dad. They saw a lady standing on the side of the road, leaning against her car. The hood was up behind her, and smoke was emanating from the engine.

Skyler's Dad pulled over and asked the lady if she needed any help. Sky couldn't remember what all the lady said, but he noticed a strange decoration hanging from her rearview mirror. It was the cartoon animation of a giant frosty pink cupcake, with awesomely huge fangs, protruding from its aggressively hungry mouth.

To this day, Skyler wasn't sure what he found so curious about the image dangling from the lady's car mirror, but apparently he was fixated on it, because the lady started asking him how old he was or something, with a googoo gaga baby voice, and Sky was so distracted by her window decor, that he didn't even notice she was talking to him.

His Dad noticed his silent, mental vaycay, and followed Skyler's eyes over to what held his attention, glancing at the blushing, fanged cupcake, that swayed slightly with the breeze, from the open windows of the lady's car. Then Mr. Stone reproachfully flicked the back of Sky's head, with his index finger, to get his attention. Skyler instantly snapped out of his zone, and quickly looked back at his Father.

Dad looked at him with a casually reprimanding stare, and said in his gruffly laid-back way, "Hey-- Stop staring at weird crap when people are talking to you. It's rude."

Even then, Skyler knew, judging by the mildly offended look on the lady's face, as she glanced back at her fanged pink cupcake decoration, that his Dad's honestly blunt attempts to scold him into better manners and social graces-- were as unintentionally funny as they were socially informative. This was how a tough, busy, single Dad taught his son etiquette and decorum.

Back in the present, at Theresa's house, Sky realizes he's being rude, stops staring at the icy, robotic sanctuary that is Theresa's house, and looks back at chatty Mrs. Thompson, as he remains squashed between Zack, Lissette, Steven and Hadji, on the cramped white sofa. Nathan sits in his wheelchair, beside them, looking just as dazed as the rest of them.

Mrs. Thompson leans forward on the ironically titled "love-seat", in the painfully loveless social room, looking a frantic mess, as she holds 1 of 10 photo albums out, on the white metal and glass coffee table, for them to see. Each book is filled with photos of Theresa as a child. Sky and his friends all look extremely uncomfortable and lost for words.

"And that's when she first learned to ride a bike. At 6-years-old. A neighbor and I showed her how to do it, without training wheels. Her Father was at work. As always." She mumbles the last part to herself, as she looks down at the photo, in lugubrious thought.

Then she perks up cheerfully, as if just remembering the silver lining on a very gray cloud, "Oh, but he's the one who bought her the bike and, and-- it was a *GREAT* bike."

Skyler nods tentatively with her, "Is that when you became Theresa's Stepmom? When she was 6?"

She nods with a distant, wet smile, "Yes." She remembers softly, in mournful melancholy, "I can't have kids. Medical malpractice. Botched abortion job killed my womb for life... couple decades ago... ironically. So Theresa was my one and only beautiful little angel. Like my own daughter. I married her Father when she was 6. We knew it looked weird. White Mother. Black daughter. But we made it work. I even made a bad joke to her Father back at the wedding-- "3rd time's a charm!", I said, haha..." Her voice trails off somberly.

"Third time's a charm?" Lissette stares at the woman with casual curiosity.

“Oh-- Yeah-- Haha,” Mrs. Thompson laughs, a bit forced, “I’m his 3rd wife. His second wife divorced him when Theresa was 4. And Theresa’s Mom-- well... No need to rehash old buried skeletons. I’m sure you kids already know all about that. You were her friends, so she must have told you.”

Skyler looks confused, “Told us what?”

Mrs. Thompson’s eyes flit up to gaze at him with that lost, faraway sorrow again, “Why-- how she died, dear. Ya know, when she was 2.”

Zack looks shocked, “Theresa’s Mom died when she was 2?”

Now Mrs. Thompson looks confused, “She didn’t tell you?” She looks down, as if grasping for thought, “How well did you say you knew Theresa again?”

“We were good friends for awhile.” Skyler lies politely.

“Yeah,” Zack adds, a bit too cheerfully for the situation, “And she dated Sky for like a split second, back in freshman year.”

Sky huffs discretely to himself before continuing on. He was trying to keep all his cards of information as close to the vest as possible. For all he knew, Theresa’s parents could have had something to do with Theresa’s death-- or The Valentine Killer-- whether they knew it or not. Either way, why risk it-- when *anybody* could be the enemy?

“Theresa told me her mom died when she was a baby.” Sky cuts Zack off from taking this conversation in the wrong direction, “I assumed she meant during childbirth. But-- if Theresa was 2, then how did her birth mom die, if I may ask?”

A foggy look of despondent reverie, on Mrs. Thompson’s face, seems to suddenly anchor itself back down to reality for a moment, as she embraces his question with an even more horrible answer, “Well-- suicide, dear. She-- she killed herself. Took a bottle of pills and just... *died*. In the bath tub. When Theresa was 2 years old. I tried to tell my husband that it wasn’t his fault, that she was ill, but... it didn’t help that so much of the suicide letter pointed to him.”

Skyler narrows his eyes at her suspiciously now, “Pointed... to... *him*? To-- Theresa’s Dad-- you mean?”

She nods curtly, still looking off and away, distracted by a labyrinthine cloud of sadness, memories, questions, regret, and uncertainty, “Yes. She said... she couldn’t take it any more.”

“Take-- what-- any more?” Skyler watches her *very* carefully.

“Him.” She looks lost in other thoughts now, as if drifting through the mind of Theresa’s Mom somehow, with new understanding.

“What-- do you mean-- *him*? What-- did he *do*?”

“Hmm?” She looks up at them, as if suddenly snapped out of deep contemplation, “Oh, nothing. Theresa’s birth Mother was just-- unable to cope with... Well-- Terrell is different from other men. He gets more easily threatened by emotion, and the emotional needs of others, more than other people do.

“Because he grew up in foster homes. So-- that-- that connection-- was missing in him. Theresa’s mother-- she just-- she just couldn’t cope with it-- with-- the way he was toward her... I guess--” Her voice trails off in new thought, as she looks away again, looking like she’s just now realized something. “I guess-- Theresa couldn’t cope either...”

Her wide eyes well up with tears, as she stares down at the glass coffee table, in frazzled reflection. “I wish she had just told me. If she’d only confided in me. I could have helped her. I could have-- I mean-- I know her Father can be-- well-- but, that-- that’s no reason to-- *kill* yourself. We-- we could have worked it out. Seen a counselor. *Something*. She just-- kept it all-- so-- bottled up inside-- like a fragile little balloon. Until finally, she just-- *popped*.”

Skyler and his friends all just glance around at each other, with disconcerted shrugs, kind of unnerved and confused now.

So Sky clears his throat, looking down in thought, and then tries again, looking back up at Mrs. Thompson, as he curiously glances around the room, "Speaking of her Dad, Mrs. Thompson-- Where is Mr. Thompson? Are you-- still with him? Did you two-- stay together?"

Skyler nods over at the white metal and glass family portrait that displays a distracted-looking, half-smiling, dark Black man, posing with teen Theresa and Mrs. Thompson.

"Who, Terrell? Oh yes." Mrs. Thompson chortles a bit neurotically, "He's at work."

She stares back at them, looking a bit crazy. Skyler and his friends all just eye each other, unsure.

"Um-- Does he know-- about his daughter's death-- today?" Skyler assumes he must not know, since he apparently isn't home to comfort his wife.

But Mrs. Thompson nods cheerfully, "Oh yes, yes. He knows."

Everyone just stares at each other in disbelief.

"And-- he still stayed at work?" Zack gawks at her.

"Yes. Work is how he emotionally connects. It's-- really the-- *only*-- way-- he emotionally connects--" She nods with an eerily forced smile.

Lissette can't believe it, "Right, but, like-- he just-- like-- *left* you here? Like, he didn't even want to-- *comfort* you, or whatever?"

Theresa's Mom shrugs-- politely numb and unmoved, "He called. It was a nice call. Ya know, I don't like to complain. He doesn't like it when we complain. So me and Theresa, we never complain. We like to keep this a positive household. No complaints. Always positive. Keeps everyone happy."

The kids all stare at each other, kind of freaked out.

Zack says what everyone's thinking, "Holy hell, that's messed up."

Nathan clears his throat awkwardly, "Does he-- *HIT* you?"

Mrs. Thompson laughs, sincerely amused, “Oh don’t be ridiculous, dear. I would never keep my daughter in a house where we both felt unsafe.”

Zack looks genuinely confused, “But-- you’d keep your daughter in a house where you both felt, *unloved?*”

Sky smacks Zack’s arm, making Zack cringe and mouth “Ow” as he holds his arm, and the others nudge Zack, or shoot him “Be nice” looks. Zack just shrugs, like they’re all just as crazy as Theresa’s parents. Mrs. Thompson clears her throat, discomfited, smiles to maintain her polite exterior, and then holds up her tea cup with a jittery hand and a tearful voice.

“Um, would any of you dears like some more tea?”

The teens all look at each other. Then back at her, shaking their heads, as they simultaneously chime all their “no thank yous”, and how they really have to go. But Mrs. Thompson SLAMS down her tea cup on the glass table, and they all abruptly stop talking, with a startled jump. They watch her, frightened, as she breathes hard, staring at her tea cup with a lilting voice that doesn’t match her tense expression.

“Don’t be silly, dears. You’ve only been here ‘bout an hour or so. Clearly-- you need-- more tea. *So--*”, she smiles brightly at them, “*More tea?*”

Everybody gulps and speaks in unison with each other, “Yes, thank you.”

She nods, pleased by this response, then rises, humming a little cheerful tune to herself, as she collects their tray of tea, and hops to the kitchen, with a bounce in her step.

Everyone glares murderously at Skyler.

“Alright, Captain.” Zack cuts his voice at Skyler, “This was your idea. Now how the hell do we get outta here?”

“Without feeling like bad people.” Steven adds.

Skyler thinks a moment, “Alright, just-- gimme a moment.”

Hadji sucks his teeth, "A moment? We been here for *HOURS* Skyler! I got *GAMES* to play, and these people are *CRAZY!*"

"Yeah--" Zack nods, "With a desperate, cracked-glass Mom, and a cold corpse of a Dad for parents-- no wonder Theresa killed herself! Holy hell, man-- I'm amazed she didn't do it sooner! Freakin' *zombie* parents..."

"THERESA DIDN'T KILL HERSELF!" Skyler snaps abruptly.

Everyone immediately hushes, stunned by Skyler's uncharacteristically angry edge-- and the bite in his tone. He softens up a bit, realizing this, as he starts absentmindedly rubbing his white wooden Cross key chain, by his side, and he pats Zack's back, in a brotherly fashion.

"Sorry. I just-- I knew her. Better. I know-- she didn't kill herself."

Zack shrugs, nodding, "It's cool, man, I understand. Whatever we can do, ya know."

"Well I just have to check something out. Something Theresa told me at school, the day she-- died. Can ya just keep our tragic Stepford Wife here-- happy for a while? So I have enough time? Just-- tell her I'm-- in the bathroom or something."

They all nod begrudgingly, but this time looking curious, as if wanting to know what Theresa told him. Before any of them can ask, Sky puts a hand to his heart, to show his gratitude, nodding at them, then he squeezes out of the cramped couch and sneaks up stairs. They all eye each other knowingly, as Mrs. Thompson returns with her tray full of hot tea.

"Oh would you look at that! I found some crumpets to share!"

"Yaaaaay." They all sadly exclaim as she happily hands them all their tea and crumpets.

CHAPTER

[8]

MEET THERESA'S HOT RED THANG

Skyler slowly and quietly sneaks into Theresa's very orderly, symmetrical, baby blue tinted room. It's sort of girly, with its lace curtains, ruffled bed, feminine clothes in the closet, and a fluffy, floral, cobalt throw rug, over by the foot of the bed. But it's all so cold. No warmth. No personality. No flavor. No joy. Something about it strikes Sky as just-- austere, eerily vacant, and politely plain.

All of Theresa's papers and books look sifted through. The slightly dusty imprint of where a computer use to be, on her pastel blue desk, is apparent. For a fleeting moment, Skyler smirks to himself at how Theresa iced him years ago, and yet now, here he is, in her bedroom. And it's the dominant blue shade of his name-- *sky*.

Then Sky looks again at Theresa's perfectly made up bed, and he sees the red stuffed toy bear sitting front and center on top of her pillows. The same red bear that she spoke to him about "still using", back in the golden halls of Secret Ridge Christian High.

It's the only stuffed toy in the room.

Skyler thinks back, remembering when they were 14 together, at that carnival, where Skyler won Theresa her red stuffed toy bear.

The sky was dark, with a giant, round, white full moon, that lit up the wispy clouds around it. The smell of fresh pink cotton candy, and the butter of popcorn and hot dogs, wafted past them, along with other running kids, who raced behind them, onto all the rides with the colorful spinning lights and loud pop music playing.

Some were with families.

Some were with friends.

Some were with crushes.

And some were playing loud games for prizes-- like they were.

But the difference between them and the other kids, was that the other kids looked like they were all having fun. Whereas, with Skyler and Theresa-- only one of them was enjoying it all-- and not for long.

Skyler raised up the red teddy bear that he won for Theresa-- victoriously-- and held it out for her to see and hug, the way he'd just seen an older girl hug the stuffed toy that her boyfriend had valiantly won for her. He was hoping he might get a kiss for his achievement the same way that guy did.

But Theresa was too busy texting on her phone to notice Skyler. She wrote to her Dad, "But you promised you'd be free for my birthday this year!" And her Dad wrote back, "I have to work." Theresa wiped her tears discretely, hiding them from view, and turned to face Sky.

Skyler grinned big at her, "Look! I got you a singing bear!"

But Theresa merely scowled at him, "I have to go. Core 4 Meeting." She started walking, then stopped, as if to remind him of a rule he'd broken, "And my Dad doesn't like stuffed toys."

Then she walked right past the bear. Skyler looked at the bear, and just stared at it-- feeling kicked in the gut.

Skyler awakens from his voyage down memory lane, glides over to Theresa's bed, picks up her toy bear, winds it up, and plays, "Rockabye Baby", in its creepy little twinkles.

"Hmm." He thinks out loud, "Still works."

Then suddenly he hears a barking dog-- a poodle to be exact. He jolts over to the window, looks outside, and sees The Singing Girl sitting by a tree in, what Skyler can only assume, is her front yard.

He admires her natural beauty for a moment.

Again-- he wants to kiss her.

Badly.

But he can't.

She's still too far away...

So his eyes drift onto her pink summer sun dress, and again, he starts to absentmindedly and rhythmically tap the white wooden Cross key chain, dangling by his pocket.

Suddenly, her poodle jumps about, in front of her, barking like crazy, at the fancy silver car that drives into Theresa's yard, snapping Sky out of his hazy day dream.

The girl looks up at Skyler and sees him staring at her from Theresa's window. He gasps, seeing her seeing him, and quickly glides to the side to hide. He looks at the round light blue metallic digital clock on the wall. It reads, 4:33PM. Then he swiftly pulls his sunglasses off his head, and onto the ridge of his nose-- and he closes his eyes.

Then he opens his eyes, glances out the window, and sees that the girl is gone from her yard. He looks a bit further out of the window and sees nothing. Then he looks down. --Suddenly he sees the girl staring back up at him from below.

He gasps, falling backwards, onto the bed, and drops the bear on the floor. Then he hears glass crashing and shattering downstairs. He rushes up, grabs the bear, and races out of the room.

Sky quietly sneaks down the stairs as Mrs. Thompson throws glass and tea cups around Mr. Thompson-- an average, simple-looking man, in gray suit pants and a white, buttoned down dress shirt. It surprises Skyler just how “generic office clerk” this guy appears to be. To have such an infamously dark track record with women-- he sure did look like the boring accountant next door. --The Clark Kent type.

But Sky can see this man, Theresa’s Dad, is no superman, as he watches him calmly drink his coffee, at his desk, from a white mug, with an image of a computer on it, that reads “Byte Me”, as he checks his emails on their PC, completely ignoring his wife, who screams bloody murder at him.

Skyler steps up to Zack, whispering, as he, Lissette, Nathan, Hadji and Steven all watch the fighting couple with awed grins-- riveted.

“Dude. *What--* is going on?” Skyler is the one gawking now.

Zack guffaws, “Oh-- Mrs. Stepford Wife couldn’t take it any more. So when Mr. Ice King came home and went to go check his emails instead of hugging her, she-- flipped out-- and started throwing things everywhere-- screaming.”

Lissette chimes in, “Yeah. So he was like, “Instead of breaking all the stuff I paid for, why don’t we just go have sex for once?” So she was like, “Instead of caring more about all the stuff you paid for than you do about me and the death of your only child-- why don’t ya just *drop dead?* “

Zack nods quickly, “Yeah, then she was like, “You wouldn’t even let Theresa go to church, cause you were so afraid she’d end up believing in something *YOU* were too *dead* inside to *connect* with! Taking *pride* in your wicked ignorance and then passing it down to your offspring like a vertical disease. The only reason you even put her in that Christian school is because you liked how state-of-the-art their technology program and computer equipment were!”

Lisette nods, “And then she was like, “You couldn’t even let her have a dog to love, cause you said they were too *messy*. Well *newsflash* you soulless *creep*-- *LIFE* is *MESSY*. Did you even know our baby girl was a school *HERO*?”

“Right, so he was like, “No. And don’t change the subject you cheating hag. In fact, if I don’t meet your needs why don’t you call your backup man to cry all over.”

“Yeah, so she was all like, “You left this union long before I did.”

“And he’s like, “Then why’d you stay?”

“So she’s like, “I was chasing the ghost of a connection that never existed. With a man who was never there --With a man who secretly hates women-- And I couldn’t leave Theresa. Not with a Father as emotionally challenged and arctic as *YOU*.”

“So he’s like, “And now we don’t have Theresa. So what’s keeping you here?”

“So she’s like, “Oh my God, you unimaginably soulless piece of shit! Burn in hell, you *ICE* hole!”

“Yeah and she’s basically been like, destroying the whole house ever since. He doesn’t do anything... but laugh at her pain. Keeps most of his thoughts to himself. I think he gets off on seeing women suffer. And torturing them with his cold, impenetrable silence. It’s, creepy.” Zack shivers.

“But very entertaining. I bet you money she keys his car after this.” Lisette smirks with a hopeful nod.

“I thought you guys wanted to leave?” Sky eyes them knowingly-- but not approvingly.

Lisette scoffs at him, “Oh my God, are you kidding me? This is just gettin’ good!”

Zack chuckles, “Yeah. You put us through all the boring uncomfortable sad bits. This is the best part. The pay off! Now I’m just waiting to see when he finally starts to give a shit.”

Skyler sighs to himself, “Oh my God, you guys, you’re like-- watching the burning car crash of a whole family-- just for fun. That’s-- sick, and-- *definitely* not cool.”

“So?” Zack and Lissette say in unison.

Sky just eyes them in awe, and then shrugs, “Right. K. Well-- I gotta phone call.”

“K.” Zack and Lissette say in unison.

Sky watches as Zack, Lissette, Steven, Hadji and Nathan all watch the couple fight, in anticipation, as they eat their crumpets. Skyler shakes his head at them in shruggish objection, and quietly sneaks out of the front door.

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ACT I: PART 3 - SHYANNE VALENTINE

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CHAPTER

[9]

MEET SHY

Outside, Skyler sneaks around the corner of the house-- and bumps into The Singing Girl. They both shout, startled, and fall to the ground. He quickly gets up and offers her his hand, as he quickly lifts his black and orange motorcycle sunglasses off of his eyes, and back atop his head. Reluctantly, she takes his hand, and he notices her hot pink WWJD! Bracelet, getting a closer look at the pink rose in her hair. A naturally pretty flower for a naturally pretty girl.

Yet again-- he wants to kiss her.

Badly.

But he can't.

Even though she's right here.

--Right in front of him.

--Because they don't know each other.

...So she's still too far away...

So-- Skyler just smiles nervously at her, "What Would Jesus Do-- Wow-- Haven't seen that bracelet in forever. Mine got lost in the laundry like-- a decade ago, haha." He chuckles, trying to sound laid-back, but sounds a bit too anxious, "I like your pink flower. It-- highlights your beauty--" He smiles warmly at her as he points to it.

She giggles and blushes shyly, but appreciatively.

He grins bigger at her, totally smitten with her, “Hey-- You have a beautiful voice-- What was that song you were singing? It was... so haunting...”

She blushes more, flattered, and with a naturally lilting voice, she smiles back at him, slightly nervous too, “Oh-- Thanks-- I-- I dunno. Just a melody I made up. I haven’t put words to it yet. Still looking for inspiration on it, I guess, haha.”

She looks at the old white Cross hanging from his pocket, as if suddenly recognizing it. Then she notices the red stuffed toy in his hands, and she looks back up at him, “And... *I have a bunch of those hot red thangs. But real life pets-- like poodles-- are even better.*” Shy nods at her dog.

Sky blushes at the toy in his hand, embarrassed by it.

Of all times, why does he have to be holding this thing right NOW? He thinks to himself.

“Oh-- Yeah-- I-- uh--” He realizes, stunned. Then he stops, “Oh.” He realizes in new thought, “It was a *code*. --“*Hot red thangs*” and “*poodles*”. That’s why she said it. --To let me know I could trust you...”

The Singing Girl nods with a warm, innocent, girl-next-door smile, “You must be Skyler Stone.”

Skyler nods, realizing, “Yeah, so, you-- *know*... me?”

“Haha, no.” She smirks, “But Theresa told me about you. Like how you always keep a big, old, white, wooden Cross key chain, that you wear on the side of your pocket every day.”

She nods at it, and he looks down at it, suddenly just now realizing that it’s his visual trademark to people.

“Son of a major case detective? Tech genius? She said you gave her the only stuffed toy she ever had, and-- she never even thanked you for it.”

Suddenly Skyler is floored-- touched even. "Wow... She... said that?"

"That... surprises you?"

"Yeah, actually. She-- I-- We-- I mean-- She was always sorta, walled off. To me. Ya know. Consumed by--"

"Core 4? Which, then got her killed? Yeah, I know. She told me she was scared of some stuff they found. So she gave me your photo with some info on it, and told me if anything happened to her to call you from a pay phone and tell you to get the red bear. Then she said you were smart enough to figure it out yourself. Good job. But what took ya so long up there?"

Skyler blushes-- but then he's confused, "Huh? Wha-- whadayou mean? I was only up there for like a minute."

She scoffs, "Humph! More like a half hour. Booooooy it's past 5'oclock! Check your watch!" She giggles, pointing to his digital black watch.

Skyler looks, and sees that his watch does in deed read, "5:07PM".

Where'd the time go? He thinks seriously to himself now.

But she just shrugs, dismissing it, "Guess Theresa hid the bear well. Wanna know what's so special about that toy?"

Confused Sky just eyes the bear in his hand, still unsure about the time lapse. Then he nods, reluctantly. She opens her mouth to speak-- but then the sound of more glass breaking inside of Theresa's house makes them cringe simultaneously.

She gestures for Sky to follow her, as she saunters back toward her house. He follows her without hesitation, up her driveway and into her pink, floral house. Steven looks out of Theresa's livingroom window and watches Skyler walk into The Singing Girl's home.

Skyler chivalrously holds the black screen door for Shyanne, as he follows her into her home. As she shuts the front door, he notices the wooden family wall plaques with sweet and spiritual statements on them, like, “FAMILY: We thank the Lord for our countless blessings”, with the image of a Cross on it, and so on, as well as the old school golden candle stick holders on the wall, across from a historic photo of a famous president-- and the vintage angel figurines decorating all the family photos that grace every surface.

Many photos show Shy as a teen, with her Mom, or 2 girls, of other races-- 1 White, 1 Asian-- who Sky figures are her best friends; Then Shy as a kid or baby, with her Mom and an older couple, whom Skyler assumes must have been her Grandparents, along with older photos of her Grandparents; and another old photo of her Grandfather dressed honorably and handsomely in an admirable military uniform, with the initials, “WW2” scribbled faintly in the bottom left-hand corner.

World War 2 veteran, Skyler thinks to himself.

Skyler’s eyes continue to drift curiously around the room, falling on the traditional, old, mahogany case, full of antique golden, glass, and ceramic dinner wears, a record player with a storage full of old black vinyl records, an old oak wood grandfather clock, an old black and dark wood organ, giant, old-style, golden colored Victorian drapes that frame the big picture glass window, where all the light pours in from the outside, through delicate white lace curtains.

Despite the modern-day technological updates to the room, like the big screen TV entertainment center, the PlayStation, the bass speakers in every corner of the ceiling, a fancy golden and wood fan and wood laminate floor-- new age faux classic-- the *authentically* old fashioned nature of Shyanne’s livingroom, with its “passed down from generation to generation” feel-- reminds him of his own home, which was passed down to his Dad from his Granddad.

It was so rare for him to actually find another *stayed* family like his-- with someone his age-- living in their isolated, transient city-- one that maintained warm family traditions, came from a wholesome, educated culture, and had a noble legacy to leave.

And spoke his language.

For the first time in Skyler's socially routine life, he feels like he's found his female match-- at least from a cultural, familial, heritage standpoint. And though he never consciously thought about it before this very moment-- now, feeling at home in somebody else's home-- one he's only been inside of for a few moments-- he suddenly and surprisingly feels refreshed-- and...

Connected.

Shyanne hums her haunting melody as she sits on the big comfy vanilla and beige fabric couch, with her pink Apple laptop, petting her perky poodle, as her Cross-pearl charm bracelet dangles. Sky glances away from the sofa set under the picture window, and looks over at the bronze leather recliner set between the organ that leads to the bathroom, and the light brown bamboo and glass coffee table that leads to the kitchen.

He turns, looks forward again, and jumps back, slightly startled, but then realizes he's just looking at himself in the giant wall mirror behind the couch that Shyanne sits on.

Slowly, he sits down beside her, admiring her evocative tune and alluring sound. Her dog sniffs him timidly, eyeing him suspiciously, as he carefully starts petting her head and scratching her behind the ears. Shyanne smiles at this.

"Aw, wow! She never lets anyone pet her at first. You must be special."

"Heheh, she probably just smells my hound on me. I got a big black and white snow dog with electric blue eyes back home. His name's Einstein. What's her name?"

“Princess. She’s a poodle. Oh-- sorry-- I forgot to offer-- You thirsty? You want some water or juice?”

“What? Oh-- heh-- no. I’m all tea and crumpeted out, thanks, haha.”

“Cool. God only knows how long we have to find The Valentine Killer.”

Sky shoots Shy a surprised look. She shoots him back a “duh” expression.

“Theresa’s killer? Valentine Killer? Ya know they’re the same, right? I mean you weren’t snooping around her room for your health. You wanna find her killers and bring righteous justice to her name. -- *Right?*”

But Skyler is hesitant, and stricken by her seemingly *knowing* certainty, “Rih... right...”

Completely aloof to his tentativeness, Shyanne shrugs with a rather chipper attitude, “OK then! Let’s not beat around the bush here, Columbo! It’s Murder She Wrote Time! So get your Law and Order on!”

She plays Law and Order sound effects on her laptop and giggles humorously at it. Skyler eyes her like he’s half-fascinated by her and half-scared of her, as she begins playing the CAVI house remix of MaryMary’s Shackles (Praise You) on her neon pink laptop. He kind of wants to laugh with her-- and examine her-- all at the same time.

“You... have a very bubbly... personality... even around --*death?*”

“Oh I’m use to people dying. My whole life, ever since I was a kid-- I just been countin’ down the days til the next relative drops dead. Every 5 years another 1 bites the dust. Ya get accustomed to it after awhile. To death, I mean. When ya grow up with it. I guess.”

She looks down, as if just now realizing how sad it is, but then looks at the plus side and smiles at Skyler again, “Lucky I wasn’t close to Theresa. Or I’d be locked up in my room now, sobbing my eyes out. I get attached a bit too easily.”

She nods to herself as she types some keys on her laptop to set it up for something, then she just casually throws in-- “But she did tell me she was gonna die.”

“*What? --When?*”, Skyler gawks at her, alarmed.

“Oh! A few days ago.” Shyanne waves her hand away dismissively, as if it’s nothing, “She told me she found some earth shaking info that was gonna get her and her pals killed --so she wanted me to help get a message to you, or your Dad. But only if something bad happened to her.”

She shakes her head, rolling her eyes in annoyance at Theresa, “Course, I pleaded with her to tell your Dad sooner, but she was certain that if she did, she’d get both you and your Dad killed. Then nobody would know the truth. But if something happened to her, there’d be too much attention on them for anyone to risk killing you too.”

Suddenly Skyler feels an unexpected burst of lamenting anger, bubble up to the surface of the volcano living inside him, “What was she *thinking*? She should have just *told* me.” There’s a biting edge to Skyler’s voice that surprises even him.

“Yep.” Shyanne just assertively nods in confident agreement with him, either not noticing-- or not caring-- about the repressed fury in his voice, “S’what I said...” Then she holds her hand out to him, “--Bear?”

Sky eyes Shy, then the bear, then he hands it to her. Shyanne opens the back of the bear, to reveal batteries, and to Skyler’s very amusing surprise--

A joint.

Sky is shocked.

“*Theresa did drugs??*”

Shyanne scoffs at him, shaking her head, “Medicinal. I asked her. She told me it was prescribed for her high-strung anxiety condition.

“I think her Stepmom got a prescription for it first, and that’s where she got the idea from. But it didn’t really mellow her out like it does to potheads. It just sorta-- balanced her out and-- made her more normal. And easier to deal with. --And likable.”

Now, suddenly, Skyler’s curious about Shyanne Valentine-- not because of boredom and nosy data mining-- like that of the random, online, time-killing info-surfing-- done by him and his fellow news-hunting hack-mates-- who are still enjoying tea and crumpets... --over at Theresa’s tragically combusting house of pain right now. But more like, he’s curious about Shyanne Valentine--

Because he’s curious about Shyanne Valentine.

“You do drugs?”

Shyanne laughs humorously at him, “Oh GOD no, haha. My imagination is my drug. Half the time people think I’m on drugs any way, and I’ve never even touched the stuff, haha! I’ve seen it destroy too many lives, and it’s killed people I cared about. Plus I have an addictive nature. Not a smart choice for someone like me-- if ya know what I mean, haha.”

Curious Skyler smiles appreciatively at Shyanne, as if relaxed and validated by her-- as well as charmed and amused. Shy doesn’t realize his expression, and merely continues to gab on about her philosophy.

“Plus-- who wants to be a somnambulist their whole life any way, right?” She laughs genuinely.

Somnambulist, Sky thinks, --Sounds familiar.

Where did he hear that word before?

It wasn’t that word exactly, though.

It was a variation of the word.

And then he remembers...

“I’d be careful with my son, if I were you, Sirius. You already lost your namesake. Ya don’t wanna lose your little killah here too. What with all of his somnambulistically dangerous activities, and what not.”

Officer Slager's chilling voice echoes through Skyler's mind-- the one he used to threaten his Dad. The one he used, to drop weird lines on him-- that sounded ominous, and felt loaded with more than just malevolent warning. It seemed like they carried the dangerous weight, of dark knowledge and deadly secrets too.

He *had* to know what it meant.

"What's a somnambulist?" Sky makes sure he sounds as detached from the word as possible.

"Oh--" Shyanne laughs with an apologetically dismissive wave of her hand, as if realizing that she's *doing that thing again*, of using big, obscure words, that nobody in the current generation-- or century-- can relate to.

"It just a big fancy word for sleepwalker. Why sleepwalk through life like a zombie, by being propped up by drugs all the time, when you could actually be living life, and experiencing all the wonderful pleasures it has to offer-- ya know?"

Sleepwalking. So that's what Slager meant.

But what did sleepwalking have to do with Skyler?

And what did sleepwalking have to do with danger or dangerous activities?

Sky realizes he's zoning out on this puzzle, and ignoring Shy, as she chitters on about the perils of drug addiction and the joys of feeling life to the fullest, and he refocuses, nodding with her, so she won't notice that he just disappeared for a while, mentally speaking. Then she just shrug-smiles back at him, assuming he was listening, and she eagerly moves forward-- wanting to get down to business.

"Now for the grand finale!" Shy victoriously pulls a hidden cherry red flash drive out from behind the joint inside of the teddy bear, and plugs it into her laptop.

Suddenly-- GIANT RED WORDS POP UP, FLASHING AT THEM ON THE SCREEN. Skyler reads them aloud, "Warning: Do not speak of or share this file with any person-- unless you want them to be killed by the people who want to erase this file-- Or unless YOU want to be killed by the people who want to erase this file. This file must ONLY be spoken of or shared with the world thru mass media upload to web and TV news outlets.

"DO NOT ATTEMPT TO SNAIL MAIL, EMAIL OR OTHERWISE DELIVER THIS FILE TO ANY ONE INDIVIDUAL- - UNTIL *AFTER* THE WHOLE WORLD SEES IT FIRST. AND DO NOT LET THE WHOLE WORLD SEE IT UNTIL *AFTER* YOU HAVE SOLID EVIDENCE AGAINST THE KILLERS, THAT GUARANTEES THEIR IMPRISONMENT OR DEATH. IF YOU DO NOT FOLLOW THESE INSTRUCTIONS, YOU WILL GET YOURSELF OR SOMEONE ELSE KILLED." Skyler eyes the page apprehensively, as the song on Shyanne's iTunes changes to The Math Remix of tobyMac's "Burn For You".

"Wow. --Theresa doesn't play." Then he rethinks his words with a dark reminder that bums him out, "Didn't-- She-- *didn't* play, I mean." He sighs in new thought now, "Guess I can't show it to my Dad then."

"Not unless you want him to diiiiiiie." Shyanne sings her words in a strangely, but humorously, sing-songy fashion.

Skyler studies her, dumbfounded and fascinated, "Um-- yeaah... Let's-- see what else is on this thing, shall we?"

Sky clicks on the flash drive icon on her laptop screen, hovering over the red, highlighted words, "Core 4 Truth Sleuth Backup File". It quickly reveals multiple files. One reads, "Valentine Killer Suspects". Skyler clicks on the file. It reveals an endless list of names on sub-folders.

Rather abruptly, a blanket of dread washes over Sky, and all he can feel is under-supplied and overwhelmed.

As well as disheartened.

“Oh-- This-- This is-- way too many people-- for me to personally check out. I’ll be an old man before I get through this list. The Valentine Killer will have already died, and passed on the evil legacy of murdering innocent people, to the next generation of psychotic newbloods, by the time I even finish *reading* this list, let alone *investigating* it. How-- How’d Theresa even have time for all this-- on top of all her school work?”

Skyler studies the extensive file contents in morbid disbelief, as he glances over at Shyanne, for confirmation that she’s seeing all this too.

But Shy just shrugs pleasantly, “She said you gave her a program years ago, based on an algorithm you made. Intuitive with hacking info and finding clues. Organizing people and so on. She really raved about it.” She nods cheerfully.

Skyler scoffs cynically, “Theresa actually used my Hack-In-The-Box program? That thing had so many bugs in it! And-- all these hidden thoughts? All this time I figured she never saw my value. I kept tryin’ so hard to connect with her. And she never did. Well physically, I guess. Sorta. But not personally. She was kind of a cranky cold robot with me. Actually, being with her made me feel kinda worthless. I shoulda been happy when she broke things off. Not sure why I got mad at her.”

“Cause you kept trying too hard to connect with her and she never tried at all. So being with her made you feel unvalued. Then she broke it off, instead the other way around.” Shy gestures in the air with her hands, “It’s like getting dumped by an ice cold ghost that kept you so frozen in a meat locker, that you actually thought that was what a healthy relationship felt like.

“Then it was over. With no real discussion or warning. After putting you through emotional hell. Locking you up in the ice age. When you know in your soul, you didn’t deserve that. Then releasing you from prison. With no explanation as to *WHY* you were ever even put there in the first place. That would piss off any intelligent person who relies on *LOGIC* as the foundation for their sanity, lovey!”

Skyler gazes back at Shyanne with spiritual wanderlust, wanting to travel the thoughts of her mind-- and perhaps the soft, luscious, rosy lips, of her sweet, pretty, angel face-- as he starts to realize something new, now feeling relieved that someone finally articulated his complicated feelings, into clear-headed, rational words for him.

“Wow. I-- I never saw it like that, but-- *yeah*. That’s how it felt.”

“I know.” She nods, “I been there. Never again! No more dating secretly frozen, rigidly hard, emotional corpses!” She laughs heartily.

He eyes her curiously-- with obviously flirty intent, “Ya keepin’ any little secrets from your man, Shy Valentine?”

Shyanne laughs, shaking her head, “Oh nooo, haha. I suck at secrets. And no boyfriend to keep em from. Why?”

Once again-- he wants to kiss her.

Badly.

But he can’t.

Even though she’s right here.

--Right next to him.

--Because they’re still too new to each other.

...So she’s still too far away...

So-- Skyler just smiles mischievously at her, in playfully plotting thought, “No reason. Hey-- Who was Theresa actively investigating when she came to you?”

Shy keeps it moving, unaware that Sky was just flirting with her, “Web Terrorist Group of Faith-Hating Ideological Supremacists called, “We Are God”. Here they are. They go around-- well-- just watch.”

She points out their photo on the screen and clicks on a file. A recorded video web chat of teens pops up. An anorexic looking girl, with pale skin, straight, bright blonde hair, a long face, and a beaky nose, graces the screen. She wears a sporty red tunic, from a name brand designer, and long, thin, silver decor dangling from her ear lobes.

To Skyler, she looks like a long, brightly adorned crane, or some other type of bird, that pecks the eyes out of its prey until its dead. Her eyes are on fire-- fierce and inflamed, with the burning blaze of unstable, illogical, blind hatred--

The same brand of dangerously psychotic cool-aid, that most terrorists and comic book supervillains, thrive on force-feeding themselves-- and their desperate followers.

On the screen pops her title, in plain white print, as if overlaid onto the video, edited into it without her knowledge, "Web Terrorist Leader - Name: iWin". iWin shouts at her followers who are all in somewhat of a Brady-Bunch-intro looking set of boxed squares on the screen-- a few boxes display a few teens, who are hanging out together in the same physical location. They all look like they're from the same region or high school.

"I don't care if she's in the hospital. You don't win the game til she SUCCESSFULLY kills herself. What part of SUCCESSFULLY kills herself do you not get? Failed suicide means nothing if they live to pray another day, telling the world how great their God is.

"The whole point is proving to them that WE are God, that they have no hope unless WE give it to them. Get it? We break their stupid faith. Then they either die, or join us. It's their choice. There's no other option. If they don't pick one of those 2 choices, you lose the game. Now go back to that religious skank and teach her that ***WE ARE GOD!***"

The teens all erupt in cheerful applause, including a short, thin girl, with tanned ivory skin, dirty blonde hair, and name brand, pale blue and white, workout sweatpants. Beads of sweat trickle down her face as she breathes faster and harder than everyone else, with a crisp-- but soggy wet-- white towel casually slung over her shoulder, like she was just summoned to this meeting while she was out running or exercising in the gym or aerobics class. Aerobics Girl looks to be about 17.

Skyler studies the screen, very put off by her-- and everyone else's-- mindlessly rabid conformity to this horrendous cyber cult, as the song on Shy's laptop changes to KiKi Sheard's War Remix.

Then Skyler sees something he can't believe.

He sees a friendly, gullible, open, honest, good-hearted person, who is nodding and accepting his directions from iWin with incredible resolve on his face. Only now-- his face doesn't look friendly. His face doesn't look gullible. His face definitely doesn't look open, honest and good-hearted. Now his face looks conspiring. Plotting. Calculating-- And ready to attack. Now-- a look of malice and murder consumes his once gregariously aloof face. And the name of the person who owns that face is--

--Abraham Davis.

CHAPTER [10] MEET WE ARE GOD

Sky stares at Abe's face in both disturbed and mortified awe, "Is that-- Abraham Davis?"

Shy nods, "Yeah. Core 4 started getting into the spy-espionage business earlier this year. Apparently, that's what got them into trouble. Not in this club. But another one, I think. Somebody-- figured it out. That's when it all started crumbling down. Or so Theresa said." Shy shrugs sadly in somber reflection, "*This* nasty group calls themselves, "*We Are God*".

"They go around terrorizing loners, who believe in God, in cyberspace, til they either kill themselves, hide, or join their anti-religion. They claim their mission is to kill all the religions of the world. Because that's what they think is wrong with society. "Too much Deity and not enough ecstasy!" They say. Theresa found out that they were somehow connected to The Valentine Killer. She never told me how."

"Wait, did-- Did you say their name is, "We Are God?"

Shyanne nods as Skyler looks up images online. Then THERE-- he finds it-- and points it out to her on her screen.

“That’s The Valentine Killer’s Card, right? Her trademark? Look at the list. It says: “My Funny Valentine’s name is: (Name Here) --This martyr was loved by a monster. Which one? 1. “#Wealth Is God”, 2. “#Whites Are God”, 3. “#We Are God”? Either way-- People who think they are God ruin the world. I am Proof.” --So, The Valentine Killer is saying-- that one of these groups, these-- “*monsters*”-- loved one of her victims. But then-- how come my Dad and his people never connected these 2 puzzle pieces before, already?”

“They’re a secret group. Nobody knows their name till they get attacked by them. Which leads to either suicide, joining the pack, or going into hiding. All of which lead to silence either way. All the oppressive supremacist clubs Core 4 infiltrated are hidden and secret. You have to be a target of theirs. Or a floating fixture in their exclusive culture, just to see *hints* of their existence, let alone info. And--”

Sky glances at the screen, then back at Shy, whom he realizes has gone silent. He keeps his eyes locked on her, until he realizes that Shyanne is shaking, with tensed up muscles. She falls back, seizing, and Skyler gasps in fearful shock. Quickly, he leaps up and over to her aid, and grabs her hand, with his right knee and left foot on the ground, at eye level with her.

“Oh my God! You got medication? I’ll go call 911!”

“N--- NO-- D-- Don’t-- C-- Call! N-- Not-- M-- Medical!”

Suddenly Shyanne stops seizing. Skyler looks at her, sorely freaked out. She looks asleep. He shakes her gently, sounding scared. “Miss? Miss! Oh my God! Oh my GOD! I don’t even know your *name!*”

Suddenly Shyanne opens her eyes, startling him, as she looks at him eerily. “My name is Shyanne Valentine-- I am The Sagittarius Seer of a higher dimension. The spirits now tell me-- that your audio analysis of Theresa’s final hour-- is now complete.”

Sky stares at Shy in newfound terror.

Shyanne waves a very friendly goodbye at Skyler's back, as he BOLTS out of her front door, not even bothering to look back at her. Now back to hiding his eyes behind his black and orange sunglasses, he quickly fast-walks off her property, and toward his friends, who are now slowly moseying down the sidewalk, still eating their crumpets, and chuckling about their domestically cataclysmic adventure at Theresa's house.

"K, thanks for stopping by! Let me know any news ya come across! Don't be a stranger! Keep me in the loop!" She smiles enthusiastically, jolly and bright.

Zack notices her for the first time, and laughs with a boyishly approving nod, as he sees Skyler leaving her house, teasing him, "Sup Sky? *Shackin up* with the *pretty lil neighbors* of your *1st ever* ex-girlfriend, just *hours* after finding out about her *death*? --*Classy move, bruh.*"

He snorts a goofy chuckle as he shakes his head in amused awe at Skyler, who's already in ball-tossing distance from them, "But good on you, man. Guess secretly reading all those "women's perspective" romance novels is finally paying off, huh? *Heheh--*"

But Skyler merely looks freaked out in flight mode, and ready to fight anyone who tries to stop him, "I think I just met The Valentine Killer. Keep walking. --WALK. --NOW."

Skyler turns, finally, and waves a fake friendly goodbye to Shyanne, with a forced, frightened grin, as he ushers his confused, equally freaked out friends into Steven's mini van.

Stunned Nathan looks up at Shy, from his wheelchair, to see her waving at them all cheerfully, and he nods back at her, with polite hesitation, in weirded out shock.

Everybody follows Sky over to his laptop as he wakes it up and raises his sunglasses back onto his head, back in the funky neon game room of his warm, earthy home. Einstein wags his tail, following them all curiously, past the Cross-graffiti designed wall.

“I’m telling you! She knew about the phone call! My audio analysis! Plus she has a pink flower in her hair, like the rose petals on the dead bodies! And get this-- Her last NAME? It’s VALENTINE! SHE-- is the friggin’ KILLER, bro!”

Zack shakes his head, folding his arms, “Nah. She can’t be. She’s too beautiful.”

Lissette rolls her eyes, placing a hand on her hip, “Oh, so beautiful girls don’t kill people?”

Zack scoffs, “Nooo. Beautiful girls don’t *SERIAL* kill people. People are too nice to them. Life smells too sweet for them to just-- go against their biological makeup-- of pretty polite passivity, and suddenly just-- go-- hunting people down, just for sport. --So unless she was like-- seriously traumatized as a kid-- I say no way she’s the killer.”

“Yeah, but she told me in her livingroom about how she grew up with death. So she’s use to people dying.”

“Yeah but-- that’s not the same as-- like, *WITNESSING* a traumatic event.” Steven shrugs, not quite convinced.

“A traumatic event like what?” Sky looks genuinely unnerved, as if he’s trying to stifle his panic with a cool composure and the support of his friends-- but it’s not entirely working. His uncharacteristically disconcerted fluster is palpable. So he looks at his laptop to mask it.

Lissette notices this.

“Like the one--”, Nathan takes a deep, labored breath, “That you witnessed--”, He takes a deep, labored breath, “As a child--” He takes a deep, labored breath.

Sky snaps his neck up from his laptop and turns to face Nathan-- and everyone else-- staring back at them, in blank confusion, "What-- what are you talking about?"

But apparently, something inside Skyler already knows what his friend is talking about, as Sky's fingers slip down, next to his pocket, and start absentmindedly stroking the chipped, peeling, white-painted arms of his withered, White, wooden cross again.

Hadji's jaw drops to the floor, "Sky-- You don't remember?"

"Don't remember what?"

Zack casually shrugs now, "Well-- it *was* a long time ago. But-- you at *LEAST* remember your occasional blackouts and loss of memory-- *Right?*"

"*WHAT?*", Skyler glares back at him, upset now.

Lisette decides to defuse Sky before this turns ugly, "Nothing. It's NOTHING. Guys-- stop joking around."

Lisette shoots them all a serious, deadly look. The 4 of them mute up and look away, as if the old sparkles on the ceiling, and all the gaming stuff in the room, that they've seen every single day for the last few years, is suddenly so much more interesting, than this woefully ticking-time-bomb of a conversation. Skyler just eyes them all, looking like a lost puppy, expecting a *real* explanation.

Instead, Lisette steps up to him, petting his shirt affectionately, "What's it say? Is it ready?"

Flummoxed Sky just watches them all for another moment. Then he reluctantly turns, and sees that his laptop screen reads, "Analysis Complete. Click to play." So he clicks it--

And it plays...

...The recorded audio conversation of The Core 4--

Only hours--

Or maybe only minutes--

Right before they died...

.....

ACT II: PART 1 - THE SECRET AUDIO

.....

CHAPTER

[11]

MEET THERESA'S FINAL CALL

RECORDED AUDIO OF THE CORE 4'S LAST
CONVERSATION ALIVE:

“Still tho, I can’t believe it worked. I was seriously terrified.” There was a slight strain in Mary’s giggle-- a shake in her voice. As if she really was dangerously terrified, and it really was taking everything inside her not to fall apart at the seams.

“Yeah but who’s gonna believe us? I mean, our files are damning. But how do we prove what they did tonight?” Abraham had a cooler head. He sounded worried-- but not wound up.

“Laura.” And finally-- Skyler hears Theresa’s voice.

“Who? Lifeguard Laura? Why?” Nelson sounded totally lost.

Theresa edified him, “Before I came in here I saw her Dad install secret cameras everywhere.”

Mary laughed, “What? Why?”

“To catch the Locker Stink Bomber. He was all tough too, like, “Nobody messes with my baby girl” haha. --I could only *WISH* my Dad ever gave that much of a crap about *ME*.” Theresa sounded genuinely doleful.

“Aw, Theresa.” Mary compassionately consoled her.

“We give a crap about you, Theresa.” Nelson added.

“More than that.” Abraham reassured her, “I give a whole sewage maintenance department about you, girl. Come give yo secret Sanitation Domination lovah some sugah. C’mon. Come to big Daddy!”

He laughed and she giggled, as their chairs scraped the ground, in the audio recording, apparently moving.

“No-- Abraham-- Don’t you throw me back in-- Abraham-- Hey-- No--”

“Come on, my Theresa! Come to Daddy! Haha! Let’s see if we can survive a 2nd time!”

“Least ya know you can breathe now!” Nathan gregariously shouted at them.

“That’s not the point! Hey, haha-- Abraham! NO!”

Theresa SCREAMED.

There was a SPLASH.

And that was the END.

Everyone stares at each other, visibly spooked out by the audio recording from Skyler’s phone call by Theresa.

“Holy crap.” Zack looks awestruck.

“There’s a video.” Skyler nods with him.

“Well yeah, there’s that.” Zack nods back, not really meaning that, “And also-- I didn’t know she had a thing for Abraham. I thought they hated each other.” He snorts in fascination at the late Core 4’s romantic love life drama, as Lissette and Steven stare at him in casual disbelief, “Dang they kept secrets good.” Zack smirks in admiration.

“*Well.*” Nathan corrects him.

“Well *what?*” Zack doesn’t even look like he’s listening for an answer.

“They kept secrets...” Nathan takes a deep, labored breath, “*Well.*”

“Right. Well *what?*” Zack continues to wait for the rest of his statement.

“They kept secrets *WELL.*” Nathan takes a deep, labored breath, “Not GOOD. But *WELL.*”

“Yes, Nathan. But well *what?*”

“OH-- my GOD... Never--” He takes a deep, labored breath, “Mind.”

“Fine, jeeze. Ya don’t gotta be so dense and thickheaded about it. Gosh.” Zack rolls his eyes, shaking his head, and strolls on, to finish eating an open bag of chips, over by the video game station.

Steven smirks in wonderment, “Sometimes I wish Zack was the killer. So I could justifiably kill *him*. But no killer is *THAT* stupid.”

Steven shakes his head, ambling in the opposite direction of Zack, with Nathan, who both sit at the table, and start playing cards. Hadji shrugs, saunters over to Zack, and hands him a game controller. They start playing video games and eating snacks. Lissette stares at Skyler.

“Wanna hack Lifeguard Laura?”

“You know me so well.” Skyler instantly holds up 2 headsets for them.

Lissette’s face lights up like a Christmas tree, grinning brightly from ear to ear.

CHAPTER

[12]

MEET THE VALENTINE KILLER'S 2ND MISTAKE

Yet again, Skyler's Dad, Detective Sirius Stone, stands, reading another Valentine card from The Valentine Killer. Only this time, instead of a church park with 2 bodies laid out against a children's playground-- it's 1 body, hidden in the dark dank alley, behind His Blessings Homeless Shelter-- another place where those, who are down on their luck, can find refuge.

Stone scrunches up his nose at the rank, vile stench of rotten milk, dirty diapers, and a dead raccoon, drifting nearby-- all of which pale, in comparison to the sharp, ungodly fumes, of the decomposing corpse staring back at him, from inside the scraped up, filthy, forest green dumpster in front of him.

For a glimpse of a moment, it strikes Stone as slightly ironic-- that the lifeless vessel, inside the garbage bin, is dressed so fancily, in his black suit and tie, as if going to a ballroom gala with his date, and yet now, is currently sitting in a trash receptacle-- the color of money.

The light is gone behind the soft, blue-green, aquamarine eyes, of the ashen-faced, fair-haired stiff, as they stare purposelessly now, up at the starry, navy blue night sky.

“My Funny Valentine’s name is: Sir Benedict George. This martyr was loved by a monster. Which one? One-- #WealthIsGod, Two-- #WhitesAreGod, or Three-- #WeAreGod? Either way-- People who think they are God ruin the world. I am Proof.” --Capital P. --*Again.*”

Stone stares at the heart-shaped red note, quizzically, and looks up from it, again, to gaze in puzzled fixation, at yet another new, drowned, dead body, with pink rose petals sprinkled all over him-- and a red lipstick heart kiss printed on the back of his hand.

The TV Media crew and crowds all buzz boisterously around the crime scene tape again, as cops push civilians back. Agent Diaz steps next to Stone, looking equally puzzled, again, with her Cross necklace still visible beneath her shirt collar.

“This one looks like ours.”

Stone nods curtly, “Complete with rose petals and all. Just like the other victims.” He points to the dark, pin-sized dot on the victim’s neck-- an injection wound. “First she tranquilizes them. Until they’re unconscious. Then she drowns them.”

He thinks out loud, with what could easily be mistaken for a hint of fascination in his voice, “It’s amazing-- how The Valentine Killer is so seductive, persuasive, convincing-- that she can get-- all of these people-- from all different walks of life-- rich, poor, Black, White, male, female... --Like some of her previous victims this year-- to all just-- *trust* her and-- *submit* to her.”

She nods with him, gazing at the body in the dumpster, “Yeah. -- And staging the body of a rich man, in the back alley dumpster of a homeless shelter? Valentine Killer got a sense of humor?”

He shakes his head, “It’s a message. Got something to do with these 3 hashtags. But I looked them up again. Still no connection.”

“Secret cult maybe?”

“Maybe.”

“Core 4 Suicides look like a botched copycat job to you?”

Stone grimaces, with deep disturbance resonating in his tone, “Out of all these cases-- there’s is the most puzzling.” But judging by the uneasy expression on his face, he looks more like he meant to say, “the most profoundly troubling”. Instead, he adds a more compelling thought, “I have a feeling that our slain sleuth youths found out something they shouldn’t have.”

“Like what?” The curiosity in her eyes is almost tangible.

“Like who The Valentine Killer is.” Stone turns to her now, with a solemn gaze.

A pondering one.

She stares back, as if now, both alerted with interest-- and eerily unsettled... --unsettled... by the cryptic aura of death and darkness circling them; one that always seems to be 2 steps ahead of them...

--Every time.

--No matter what they do.

Suddenly an older, white-haired man, in old, tattered clothes, clinks and clanks through some rubbish in the alley, against the side of the building across from them-- inside the crime scene tape. Most other officers and agents are too distracted, interviewing people, chatting, and studying evidence, to notice the man.

But Stone sees him--

As does Officer Bob, who goes over to tell him to leave.

Stone jogs over to the man, and intervenes, nodding at Officer Bob to leave him be. Bob nods and carries on. Meanwhile, Diaz watches Stone, as he talks to the homeless man, giving him his card and shaking his hand. Then she turns back to look at the creepy cadaver staring up at the dark open sky, and she sighs.

“I wonder who killed you...” Her voice lilts a little.

But her mouth curls up slightly, with an impish little smirk...

CHAPTER

[13]

MEET LISSETTE'S OBSESSION

Wearry Lissette yanks off her silver headset, balls up her fists, and rubs her eyes with them, yawning and stretching-- trying to shake off the fatigue of failure-- as she sits in her wheeled, cushiony, curved-back, black office chair, side-by-side, next to Skyler, who plugs away at his neon-blue-lit, silver and white keyboard, staring at his big silver and black computer screen, next to hers.

The crashing electro-bass beats of upbeat dubstep music, in the form of a Harry Potter theme score remix, wobble faintly from his computer speakers, as she seasaws up from his desk and circles around his funky, junky bedroom.

She takes a moment to admire his wall shelves, full of mechanical and technological science project awards, and certificates of achievement, as if finding them all both mesmerizing-- and unrelatable-- and then she resumes absentmindedly glancing around, at all the unique and cutting edge gadgets, gizmos, and colorful flashing party laser lights, that bedizen-- and clutter up-- Sky's chaotic abode.

She surveys how all his fun and funky tech contraptions randomly emerge, in between various paperwork, cups, plates, utensils, empty water bottles, inside-out shirts, jeans, shoes, and the not-so-fresh smelling old socks, strewn all across his fluffy midnight blue carpet.

Then she plops down on his messy, deep, dark, ocean blue bed, next to his azure blue walls-- and Einstein-- who lays upward, chewing on a doggy toy. She pets him inattentively, as she watches Sky, whose eyes remain fixated on his computer.

A tall, auburn, wooden picture frame, in the form of a Cross, sits on his clear, fiberglass desk, showing photos of 6-year-old Sky, hugged between his Dad and a pretty lady in a pretty red dress, around his Dad's age, whose features and hue match Skyler's, and an older boy, about 16, who looks a bit like Skyler-- all smiling together-- warm and happy.

Without looking at her, Skyler chuckles at Lissette, still typing away on his keys.

"Ya quittin' on me already, girl??"

She huffs, more irritated than exhausted, "Sky. I'm sorry everybody's precious school heroes are dead-- but we've spent hours hacking every single smart device in Laura's home, and we couldn't find squat."

"Yeah, well. --Maybe we missed one." He shrugs.

"And maybe they keep data off da grid." She cuts her voice at him, more to confirm her protest than to actually argue with him.

Skyler smirks loudly, "Off the grid? What-- Like *analog*? Where are we? Back in the *dinosaur age*?"

"Maybe." Lissette lies back on Sky's bed and stares up at all the greenish-yellow, glow-in-the-dark stars his Mother pasted there when he was a child. Stars he never took down.

"I mean, why do they never pick up a phone whenever we call? Maybe-- they just don't know how to use technology."

"Haha, yeah, OK, Lissette. I'm pretty sure, Laura, who's *our* age, knows how to use the *cell* phone that we *always* see her talking on at school, when she's not deep-sea diving, in her swimming pool home-away-from-home."

“Well what’s your conclusion then, Detective Skyler? Cause I checked for an independent network feed, and I couldn’t find one.”

“I did. It’s her Dad’s security company network. It was hard to find. But I hacked it.”

“And?”

“Nothing.”

“Exactly.”

Sky stops typing, realizing she has a point. He leans back, rubs his eyes, equally tired, and stretches-- in thought. Then he exhales, grabs the clear plastic bottle from his desk, pops the top, and takes a sip. The cool, raspberry flavored, pastel purple water swims past his warm lips, and flows through his thirsty body, like a soothing blanket of liquid peace, revitalizing his *human* operating system. Sky rises, trudges over to his bed, and plops next to Lissette, lying back on a pillow, beside her, as the wobbly ‘Terabyte Frenzy’ Harry Potter dubstep theme score remix ends, and the wobbly ‘APH’ dubstep remix of Pirates of The Caribbean’s theme score begins playing from his laptop. As if on cue, Lissette immediately pulls out a joint and tries to give it to him.

“Mental relaxation?”

Skyler shakes his head, fatigued by this routine of theirs, “Lissette, you know I don’t do drugs. Why do you always try me like every single month? Seriously. It’s annoying. No means no.”

Lissette shrugs, sourly disappointed, and puts it back in her pocket, “People change. Heard ya defend marijuana in debate class last week.”

“Yeah MEDICAL marijuana. I’m not a slacker, Lissette. I mean, do what you want, but I have my drug. It’s inventing. Hacking. Gaming. And I don’t even like drug culture. I think it slowly devours a society from the inside out. Keeps us all imprisoned, enslaved, decaying-- in those ever-deceiving poppy fields, over in the land of Oz.”

“--Whatever.” She rolls her eyes and looks away, frustrated-- and plotting. Not particularly well-- clearly-- but plotting all the same. Then she glances over, studying him, as he stares up at the ceiling. She suddenly grabs the sunglasses from his head and puts them on over her eyes.

He looks over at her to see that she’s got them on, smiling big at him. He smirks at her goofy grin, before looking back up at his ceiling. Her smile fades a little, seeing that she lost his attention as quickly as she got it.

So she looks down at Sky’s Cross, hanging out from his pocket, and grabs it, pulling his jingling keys out with it.

He immediately jumps, moving to snatch it back from her, on reflex, but she snatches it out of his grasp, knowingly. Then he realizes he’s being a bit possessive and paranoid about losing it. So, reluctantly, he falls back, but watches his Cross carefully, as she studies it in her hands.

She merely rubs her fingers along the bumpy surface and dull, splintered edges, of the faded, white-dyed wood, and admires the authentic old-school, heavy-solid weight, of the Latin-styled Cross in her palms.

He exhales, taking a breath, cools himself, clearing his throat a bit anxiously, and takes his eyes off of it, to gaze up at his ceiling for a moment.

Then Lissette looks back at spaced out Skyler, and she admires him, as if wondering what he’s thinking. She looks back up at the starry ceiling that he’s staring at, and smiles with him.

“Remember when we were kids? Back when life was so simple?”

Skyler makes a slight face, as if he can’t remember what on earth Lissette is talking about, “Was it? Or was it just hidden from us? All the darkness of the world?”

There's a darkness in his tone.

A silent sadness.

A secret loneliness.

A sinister mystery.

--One poorly masked by the light-hearted air of child-like simplicity, with which he tries to cover it. Whether consciously-- or subconsciously.

Lisette shrugs, "I remember being happier then."

Skyler inadvertently smirks, "Ha, who doesn't, Lisette? Life is always better when you're a kid. Then you grow up, and it sucks. The fantasy is over. Reality sets in." He thinks about it for a beat, "Kinda punches you in the face, actually. --And *hard*."

"Jeeze Scrooge. Just kill my memory buzz why don't you." She rolls her eyes.

He snaps out of his dismal daze, with cheerfully regenerated fortitude, "Haha, sorry. My bad."

She looks at him, then back at the stars, thinking again, trying to come up with something that will work with this guy. Then-- she thinks she's found it.

"Remember that 4th of July party?"

"Which one?"

"The last one. Where those girls got us all to play Spin The Bottle?"

He laughs, remembering, "Haha, oh yeah, and Zack was so desperate to get a kiss from Laura, and it just wasn't happenin' for him. Poor guy. So sad."

Lisette looks at him now, narrowing her eyes at him with a softer tone, "*We* almost kissed."

Skyler's still aloof, "Who? You and *me*--" Surprised, he tries to remember it, but, for some reason, can't, "We did?"

"Yeah. Then Nathan had to go to the hospital. Remember?"

Suddenly, he remembers, “Oh yeah. Looked like he was dying.”

“Right, but--” She continues, as if Nathan dying-- will *NOT*-- get in the way-- of her getting this kiss-- from Skyler, “What woulda happened if-- if Nathan didn’t get sick... and-- and we kissed?”

Skyler thinks about it. Then a look of realization starts to dawn on his face-- and he’s immediately surprised that he didn’t realize it sooner. Slowly, he turns away from the stars, to look over at Lissette-- who’s staring into him-- intensely.

“So *THAT’S* why you keep trying to get me high all the time. You’re trying to knock me down a peg, so you can seduce me.” He grins big at her, in teasing disbelief.

She blushes furiously, embarrassed, but unintentionally smiling, “Well *something’s* gotta make you more attainable. You can’t just stay out of *every* girl’s league *forever*.”

It’s Skyler’s turn to blush now, as the wobbly Pirates of The Caribbean dubstep theme score remix ends, and the wobbly ‘Eleventh Step’ dubstep remix of Doctor Who’s theme score begins playing on his iTunes.

Compared to most guys, he knew he was a quality, stand-up guy-- but he never thought of himself as “out of someone’s league”. He just thought of himself as, “different”. A “misfit”, with a pack of other “misfit” friends, who all just happened to “misfit” perfectly well together.

Zack and Lissette were misfits-- because of their impeccably well-mannered self-control, and genteel social graces-- *sarcasm*. Nathan, because of his medical dysfunction. Hadji, because of his compulsive virtual reality mania. Steven, because of his sometimes crippling shy nature. And Skyler-- because of his chronic obsession with inventing things, among other, *lesser* known things about him, that made Sky more of a tribeless soul than most people realized.

Put them together and they were all a ragtag bunch of funky misfits-- that just happened to gel well with each other, and *only* with each other.

Because they emotionally needed each other--

--To socially anchor each other.

And without each other...

...They would all likely be alone.

But now, here he was, being told by his only real female friend, that he was thought of as a top notch catch, by a variety of girls, who he was, no doubt, completely unaware of. Not out of disinterest, but rather, out of distraction.

Distracted by his projects.

Distracted by his friends.

Distracted by his martial arts sessions.

Distracted by his memories...

And now-- Distracted by Theresa-- and the mysterious death of The Core 4.

With all that was going on in his life, how could he possibly notice all the lovely young ladies...

--who were apparently noticing him now?

Suddenly, the reality of Lissette being in his bedroom, on his bed, next to him, and the close proximity they share, at the current moment, feels different-- like a tenuous veil of unconsciousness has suddenly just been lifted-- and he no longer sees Lissette as just his childhood friend, with a cute childhood crush on him-- but as one of many girls-in-heat-- who were secretly trying to get with him now.

He'd be wildly flattered by it--

--If he wasn't mildly terrified by it, even more.

"Lissette... --Uh..." He tries to collect his thoughts-- and more importantly, to choose his words-- and his tone-- very carefully, treading lightly with Lissette's vulnerable-- and temperamental-- feelings, "--You know we'd make, like, a HORRIBLE couple, right?"

Lisette's eyes widen in offended surprise at him, as if such a thought was not only the furthest thing from her mind-- but completely and utterly impossible, in her worldview.

"What?? No we wouldn't!!"

Skyler balks at her rash dissent, "Oh my God, Lisette, *yes we would*. And it would totally ruin our friendship. You're like-- total tomboy-- and I'm like-- *NOT*."

"So?" She looks genuinely ready to battle this one out to the bloody end, "We balance each other out!"

"No, I don't mean we're opposites. I mean, like, we're, different. Like, I'm not saying I'm not tough. I can fight. I don't want to, but I can. I just mean like, I'm all... --mental and spiritual and emotional and-- I dunno, just-- deep. Creative. Relational. Articulately introspective. And-- you're like-- um-- well--"

She desperately wants to know what, in his mind, is keeping him from her, "What? *What* am I?"

Skyler exhales, giving up, "You're just physical, Lisette. You're great and everything, and attractive, but you're just, like... more external, or whatever."

"What the hell does that mean?"

He can already hear the mounting offense in her voice, as she starts to hunch back on her heels, like a wildcat, ready to maul the "league" out of him. Skyler thinks fast and nervously-- failing to come up with any adequate words that will affectionately deter Lisette, without sending her into a volcanic eruption.

"I mean-- um-- you-- um-- well-- I--"

"It doesn't sound like you're arty-cuticle-lee-inspection to me." She smirks.

"Articulately introspective." He absentmindedly corrects her.

"*What?*"

“Nothing.” Skyler is clearly scared of hurting her, “Um. I just mean. Like when we go out, and someone bumps into me, I’m like, “Whoa bro, you OK?”. And he’s like, “Yeah bro, my bad”. Or vice versa. But when someone bumps into YOU, you’re all like, “What da FUDGE bitch? Wanna fight?” And she be all like, “No”. And you be all like... --“Yea dat’s what I thought trick!” And then you go back into like, full on *Let’s Play Games and Hack People* mode. It’s-- *really*, so bizarre, Lissette. Like-- you’re sorta this, tough tech hood geek-- with a heart of gold. Like you’re computer smart, but-- not a big fan of-- uh-- decorum?”

“What’s decorum?”

“Exactly. I mean-- like-- I’m all about controlling my emotions.”

“And what am I?”

“*LITERALLY* the *EXACT* opposite.”

“Alright... So teach me.” She shrugs rather receptively.

But Skyler knows she’ll basically say and do anything to get this ball rolling-- a ball that he sees more as a giant square mountain the weight of 50 tons...

“OK... but... um... We don’t, like, gel, in a... personality and nature sort of way, like-- *romantically*.“

“We never tried it!” She protests honestly-- and fairly.

Skyler sighs, frustrated, “OK, Lissette, you’re just-- more-- mainstream than me.”

“My supposed to know what dat means?”

“You obey pop culture social trends and-- I don’t. Basically. I go against the grain. You go with it. I pick and choose what sounds right to me. You gobble it all up like it’s all good. And maybe it is, to *you*. But not to me. When I see messed up things, I turn away. When you see it, you-- follow it right off a cliff. --*Repeatedly*.”

They stare at each other in silence for an awkward beat.

“So what are you saying? I’m stupid?”

He realizes, and tries again, apologetically, “NO NO NO-- Um, NO. Just that you’re like, ya know-- how most people are. And I’m just-- not. I’m more of a non-conformist. Whether it’s cause I just have, different... moods or, I just think creatively... more... I dunno. I just don’t roll with the pack-- and you do. That’s all.”

“Wow. Theresa’s *dead*-- and you should be *over her*-- and *move on* with *ME* now-- but you callin’ me a common, rowdy, dumb, basic bitch instead.”

Now Skyler is confused, “Theresa? What? God-- No-- Lissette-- That’s not what I’m say--”

“Well you *KEEP* your stupid murder mystery, and your stupid Cross key chain, and your stupid *MESSY* room, with your stupid wall of awards, by your stupid genius self! Cause this common, rowdy, dumb *BITCH* aint helpin’ you do *SHIT!*”

Crying Lissette leaps off of his bed, like a trapeze artist, as the last song on Skyler’s dubstep playlist ends, immersing them in angry, awkward silence now.

Skyler immediately snatches his Cross key chain back from Lissette, as she springs to her feet and darts away from him, as if getting it back is all he’s really been thinking about, ever since the moment she took it from him. He quickly shoves the keys back into the side pouch of his black jeans, and holds his Cross next to his pocket--

--*There.*

--*Where it belongs.*

Then he watches Lissette spin out of control, as she kicks his foggy, colorfully lit up, flashing trash can across his room, littering his floor with banana peels, gum wrappers, balled up paper wads, empty yogurt cups, empty bottles of aspirin, etc-- and she sweeps everything off of his desk, grabbing his cell phone and lunging it at him.

He moves out of the way-- just in time-- and it hits the wall, breaking into a dozen pieces, as parts of it fall to his floor. Then she stomps out of his room and slams the door shut. His heart races as he just stares at the wreckage, left behind in her wake, spiritually shell-shocked. Then she opens his door again and SHOUTS at him.

“OH AND *BY THE WAY!* WHEN YOU WERE A LITTLE KID YOU SAW YOUR MOM AND BIG BROTHER GET *EXECUTED* BY RACIST COPS, AND THEN YOU *FORGOT ABOUT IT ALL*, AND YOU BEEN HAVIN’ RANDOM BLACKOUTS AND MEMORY LOSS *EVER SINCE!* CAUSE UNLIKE ME AND MY DUMB ASS-- *YOU’RE EFFIN LOCO EN LA CABASA, CHICO!* YOUR GENIUS ASS IS *CRAZY AS FUDGE!* EAT *THAT*, ROMEO!”

Then she yanks off his sunglasses, chucks them at him, making him duck as they hit the wall and break, and she slams the door again, making Sky jump, and some of the awards and photo frames on his wall come crashing down to the floor. Sky jolts again, now at the noise and vibration of their fall, startled-- and stares back in awe-- thinking.

“Right. Cause who wouldn’t want to have *THAT* for a girlfriend every day?”

He jumps as he hears the downstairs front door slam shut, looks at his broken sunglasses, and shakes his head at the damage. Then he gets up, turns his trash can right side up, throws the broken sunglass pieces away into it, opens his desk drawer, and pulls out a brand new pair, from a drawer full of new black and neon-orange motorcycles, identical to the ones Lissette just broke-- as if this is their routine.

Then he looks down and sees a flash drive that fell off his desk. He gets up, grabs it from the floor, sits in his swivel chair, plugs it into his Mac, and clicks around to check its contents. Everything's there on the USB-- Looks fine. But then he notices a file, titled... "Shy Valentine".

He stares at her name for a moment.

Then he clicks it...

...and he sees a series of folders pop up, one of which he opens. There, he sees a PDF manuscript titled, "I Didn't See It Coming-- Chronicle of A Teen Prophet". Then he reads the first few lines:

"He told me he loved me as he locked me in a freezer, and I didn't see it coming. Even though, I, my dear, am a teen prophet. These are just one of many things that I never saw coming, in life. I know. It makes you wonder, "Well then what's the point of being a prophet?"

"Curious." Skyler thinks out loud-- and reads on, until he gets to the end-- near page 250-- and he reads it out loud to himself, "So all that time, I thought I was trapped, in a sea of bleakness, at the mercy of dullards and dingbats.

"To my left, were all the dullards-- like my ex-boyfriend --whose dead spirits, broken souls, and spiritual disconnection, I couldn't intimately connect with.

"To my right, were all the dingbats-- like my ex-admirer --whose clueless narcissism, arrogant insensitivity, and spiritual condescension, I couldn't intimately connect with.

"But when I spoke my mind-- and spoke up for the voiceless ones like me-- things changed. I had basically told the dullards on my left, *they were **GOING** to respect our value, our values, and our purpose in life.*

"And I told the dingbats on my right, *they were **GOING** to respect our value, our experience, and our existence in life. And both of them were **GOING-- to RESPECT-- our TRUTH.***

“From our heroism to our royalty. From our genius to our love. From our hard work and skill, to our soft beauty and elegance. From our similar commonality, to our special uniqueness. From our boring normalcy, to our admirable exceptionality.

“--And all the priceless humanity in between.

“OUR TRUTH WAS GOING TO BE TOLD--

“--AND OUR VALUE WAS GOING TO BE RESPECTED.

“--Whether they all liked it or not. Whether they all understood it or not. Whether they all were ready for it or not. --And then the floodgates opened, and I finally discovered how many other people were out there, getting just as neglected, just as slandered, and just as socially or morally orphaned, by the powers that be-- just like me.

“That’s when I realized that I really wasn’t alone. --Or locked in that cold freezer. Or trapped in that hot volcano.

“I was free.

“I was connected.

“I was empowered.

*“--And I was ready to take on the world. With a new hope, from The Divine Source, Whom I know as my Creator, Who breathed life into me at conception. And from that moment on, an interesting, epic journey awaited me. --Now *THAT* I really *DID* see coming! The End.” Sky pulls back, and looks at the screen, chuckling to himself.*

“Wow. Lotta sexual philosophy and truth obsession in there. I pegged you wrong Miss Shyanne Valentine. Beautiful. Brilliant. And not a big fan of shallow souls. You’re my new favorite person, girl.” He stares back at the screen with a fascinated huff of pleasant surprise.

*Then he plays Michael Jackson’s song “We’ve Had Enough” on his iTunes, as he reads Theresa’s notes on Shy, “*Highest Education Level: Currently attending Uptown Central University*”. His eyes widen with curious surprise, “Whoa-- A college girl? Really. Thought we were in the same grade, Miss Valentine. That’s interesting.”*

He scrolls down through Theresa's notes, "And what was *your* take on Miss Valentine, oh dear Theresa?" He reads on.

"From my analysis, even if the evidence, alibis, and witnesses all pointed The Valentine Murders to Miss Shyanne Valentine-- which they don't-- her psych profile doesn't fit.

"The Valentine Killer is clearly a spiritually detached, and sexually dominant chameleon, who feels no spiritual penalty when they take a life-- because their spirit is already dead.

"The killer also takes the lead in sexual control over their Valentine victims, even though every murder is chaste. And they can apparently mutate their personality and appearance, and transform themselves to be whoever their victims want or feel comfortable with, in order to lull them into a false sense of security-- to catch them.

"Whereas, Miss Valentine is so spiritually attached, and wholly in tact inside, that, despite her apparently inherently sensual nature-- or perhaps, partly because of it-- she even views common things such as sex, to be spiritually and morally sacred, as depicted in the Christian Bible, and therefore is saving it for love and marr-- iage."

Skyler stops to read that again, "Whaaat... For real?", he croons to himself as he reads on...

"She is also traditionally passive with the opposite sex, and only seems to get passionately excited about strong, confident, virile men, with youthfully outgoing, leader-like natures, and seductively flirty, playful personalities.

"The type of masculine guys who protect, defend-- and dominate-- but have some type of romantic, and spiritual intuition-- or otherwise perceptively sensitive soul-- and sweet, sensual, tender touch-- "to balance it out", she says. So she is obviously *NOT* The Valentine Killer."

Sky scrutinizes that paragraph as if studying for his final exams, “So the sweet, smart, bubbly, college angel, likes to be dominated by Mr. Prince Charming, with the heart of gold...” He thinks about it for a beat, “I can do that.” He assures himself persuasively. Then he reads on...

“Furthermore, Miss Valentine, while flexible and mutable, and able to adapt to a wide range of social dynamics, is no soul-switching artist. Her ability to conform to various interpersonal situations is merely superficial, and most often, for the sake of being polite and courteous.

“Otherwise, she is very much consistent in who she is, and constant in how she presents herself. In fact, at times, she is so transparently honest, that her blunt truth bombs leave a jarring trail of social wreckage behind her. A refresher course in tact and diplomacy wouldn’t hurt her.”

Skyler laughs at this, “Blunt, direct, and to the point. I could trust someone like you.”

He studies Shy’s photo for a moment. Then he looks in the mirror, removes his blue baseball cap, and replaces it with the artist’s black beret from his robotic-looking treasure chest of random stuff, that he pulled out from his closet earlier in the week-- and never got around to pushing back in.

He hikes up his sleeves, and flexes his muscles in the mirror, holding his body erect, and waving a shadow of suddenly piercing, penetrating, perceptive pensiveness, over his abruptly mature-looking eyes.

“Hi Shy. Yeah, I go to Midtown University, way across town. It’s a huge place. So many classes. Why don’t we go grab a bite to eat and talk about it? My treat.” He practices in the mirror, dropping his voice a little lower, and watches how his eyes move with his face, to master his new persona.

He repeats again, only better this time, “Hi Shy. Yeah, I go to Midtown University, way across town. It’s a huge place. So many classes. Why don’t we go grab a bite to eat and talk about it? My treat.”

He loosens up a bit, looking more relaxed and natural, and tries again, “Hi Shy. Yeah, I go to Midtown University, way across town. It’s a huge place. So many classes. Why don’t we go grab a bite to eat and talk about it? My treat.”

Bingo.

That’s the one.

He grins knowingly at himself, realizing that he’s got it down now. Then he tries another one.

“Hey Shy. Love your work.” He tries it again, a different way, “Hey Shy. Love your work.” He chucks that one and tries it again, with more finesse, “Hey Shy. Love your work.”

Perfect.

Opening line.

He smiles back at his reflection, knowing he’s just mastered how to talk to Shyanne, when he sees her again. He looks a little closer at himself, leans in, and furrows his brow, at his five o'clock shadow, feeling his face and chin.

“You need to shave.” He reminds himself.

Then he frames his long fingers around his dark, hazel eyes, pops out his clear, contact lenses, picks up the small, round, plastic, sky blue container from his desk, opens it, and puts his contact lenses in it for the night.

He catches another glimpse of Shyanne in Theresa’s file and admires her pretty pictures. Some of her smiling warmly and sweetly. Others of her gazing seriously and mysteriously, in unidentified glamour shots. Clearly, he’s captivated by her, staring deep into her eyes-- wondering what else is behind them-- and how he can get closer to her...

Then he hears the dying whistle of his shattered cell phone on the floor, as it sadly sings to him that a new message has arrived in his digital inbox. He rubs his head, sighs, pulls out a tool kit from his desk drawer, and starts building a new phone from scratch-- as he starts humming Shyanne's haunting melody to himself, unconsciously-- and perhaps...

--Hypnotized.

CHAPTER

[14]

MEET SKYLER'S DARK PAST

Skyler tries to dream another dream-- a better dream-- a decent dream-- but every so often, his mind just compulsively brings him back to this horrifying core memory from his childhood-- against his conscious will-- no matter what he does to will it away.

It's always the same flashback-- a nightmare of reality-- that haunts him with vicious aggression.

Like a violent horde of fugly, ravenous zombies, trying desperately to break into a newly rebuilt, beautiful palace-- after a paralyzing plague threatened to wipe out the whole planet. And the remnants of that plague are still threatening to wipe him-- and his beautiful, newly rebuilt reality-- out of existence...

Six-year-old Skyler hid quietly in the compact trunk of the beat up, old, black, sports car, with the neon orange stripe running through it-- the worn down version of 16-year-old Skyler's motorcycle today.

It was just a leftover relic from his Father's previous life as a cool, sporty badass-- before he settled down, got married, and had kids.

At the time, their family could afford a 2nd car, so both of Skyler's parents could drive at the same time, when need-be. But they couldn't yet afford to replace this car with a 3rd one.

Quiet as it was kept-- Dad secretly didn't really want to let it go yet either. To him, it was like getting rid of his cool-guy factor. That tough, rebellious scrapper streak in him, that Sky's Mom fell for, in his Dad.

But, ironically, as fate would have it-- the brand new milky white mini-van was in the shop, with mechanical issues-- so Sky's Mom had to drive *this* car-- the one that she almost hated now-- Dad's old, impress-the-girls, race car.

And to this day, Skyler would always wonder if the mini-van being stuck at the repair shop is what *saved his life*-- by giving him a car that he could hide in the trunk of-- because mini vans don't have trunks, and someone would have surely seen him in the mini-van if he was hiding there-- or if not being in the mini-van that day, is what *damned his family*, by getting them pulled over in the first place-- and therefore-- got half of his family taken away from him--

Forever.

They never spoke of it, but Skyler knew in the back of his mind-- and heart-- that his Dad always wondered this million dollar question too-- and it ate him up inside-- until he had to throw himself into his work, just to run away from the pain and guilt of wondering-- if he unknowingly contributed to the atrocity that happened to the love of his life-- and to his first born son.

The son who was just like him.

Little Skyler looked through the keyhole, at the brewing tragedy-- that seemed wrongfully bathed in the afternoon sunlight, under a beautiful clear blue sky-- about to unfold before him, and saw his 16-year-old brother, Sirius Stone Junior, pray The Lord's Prayer:

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us of our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory-- forever and ever-- Amen.”

Sky watched him pray quietly, in the background, as his Mom cried and screamed, desperately pleading with their proud predators, in her solid, pretty pink off-the-shoulder, summer sun dress, that flowed in the breeze. They were held down on the pallid rural road, by the heavy, muscular knees of 5 men in police uniforms, that crushed down on their fragile heads and necks-- Like they were nothing but rabid wild beasts.

Six-year-old Skyler peeked through the keyhole, trembling in confused fear, as he watched a strong-bodied man, of about average height, in his late 20s or early 30s, with the build of a quarterback, pale khaki skin, close-set gunmetal eyes, and straight, spiked, dark hair-- a man whom Sky would come to learn was called, “Officer Pantaleo”. -- He yanked his big brother’s bloody head by the ear, scowled viciously at his puffy, swollen face-- and cursed him.

“I’m the only god you need to respect, boy. You pray to *ME*... *WE* -- are *GOD*. ”

Without another word, Pantaleo drew out his gun-- and shot Sirius Stone Junior straight in the head-- killing Skyler’s brother--

Dead.

His Mom SCREAMED bloody murder, weeping and choking, in heart-wrenching shrieks, of insane pain and anguish, still stuck beneath the meaty knees, of the hardback men who were hired to protect and serve her, her family, and their entire community.

Little Skyler gasped and jumped, in stunned, tearful bewilderment and terror, not sure what that loud popping sound was, or why his Mother was screaming-- or why his big brother wasn't moving any more.

All he knew is that he could smell the gritty, granular odor of what he would later learn is called, "gun powder"-- and he could taste the metallic tang of blood, trickling down his throat, from the knee-jerk reaction he had, of biting the inside of his own lip, in startled panic.

Officer Pantaleo gestured to the other cops around him-- most of whom all looked either just as indifferent-- or just as smug-- as he did.

"Bring the Mother over here."

Little Skyler whimpered involuntarily, as he saw the cops get off of his weeping Mother's neck, and drag her over to the same cop, who just made his big brother stop moving.

Just then, Pantaleo turned curiously, and looked back at the trunk of Skyler's Dad's old car-- as if looking directly at little Skyler, who gasped in wide-eyed startle, at the man's chillingly evil gaze-- a gaze that powerfully unnerved him-- and compelled Skyler to pull back from the keyhole, as if to hide from a man who could not actually see him-- in a cramped up space where he could not actually hide himself-- from anyone who came over--

--And opened the trunk.

Little Skyler yanked himself back from the keyhole so fast and hard, that his hands skidded back, across the hard, woolly, short-haired, dark, black carpeting inside the trunk, scarring his small palms angrily, with a rashy red rug burn.

But he bit his lip, sucked up the pain, and kept his mouth shut, because somehow, even at 6-years-old, he knew, that if he made a sound-- if that man laid eyes on him-- he would make him stop moving too.

Or maybe it was that little voice inside him telling him what to do--
to protect him...

...His secret hidden guardian angel.

But a painful seed of deeply wounded abandonment, suddenly
began to paralyze Skyler, in profound fear and doubt, as he wondered--

Why wasn't his Father there to save them?

Then Sky hears the little drip drip drip drops of water hitting a dirty
white ceramic sink.

--Followed by the faint sound of a jingling bell that rings above a
glass door, as it opens.

--Followed by a loud air conditioner blowing forward, the wrinkled
plastic red ribbon, that's tied to its dusty beige vent, as it flutters in the
air.

--Then he sees a hard, thin, jagged, dark gray, metal wire in his
hands.

--Then he sees a Cross tattoo on an ivory ankle.

--And then he hears the blood-curdling screams of a teenage girl,
screeching for help, echo faintly in the background. And before Skyler
can figure out who she is or why she's screaming--

He wakes up.

Back in his bedroom.

Back in the dark hour of midnight.

Back at 16.

And drenched in a pool of cold sweat. He quickly opens his night
stand drawer, pulls out his motorcycle keys, looks at his old, white-
painted, wooden Cross key chain, and holds it close to his chest,
breathing hard... looking stressed...

...And feeling profoundly disturbed...

ACT II: PART 2 - LAURA MITCHELL

CHAPTER

[15]

MEET LITTLE SATAN JUNIOR

IT'S FRIDAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-JUSTICE DAY #3)-- and, with his signature black and neon orange sunglasses atop his forehead, Skyler slams his locker shut, next to the locker with the girly glittery blingy Cross sticker on it, in the Secret Ridge Christian High school halls, in the early afternoon.

Then he turns and jumps-- startled-- seeing a frantic Zack. Zack stands in his face, with a freaked out stare, bags under his eyes, and messy hair. His clothes, of course, are *always* in youthfully rebellious form. But the rest?

--Clearly uncharacteristic of Zack's usually loose and jolly self.

Sky eyes him with a mischievously amused smirk, like Zack's a clown, who's just goofing around again, and he chuckles at his disheveled state.

"Dude-- Who stink bombed *your* locker?"

"She's gone, dude. I can't find her."

"Can't find... --*who?*"

“Laura! She’s missing, man! No one’s seen her since The Core 4 Kill! Even her neighbor says she hasn’t seen any cars in the driveway. Like the whole family just got wiped off the whole freakin’ planet!! -- Oh God. The Valentine Killer murdered my Laura! She’s-- *dead!* My sweet Laura’s *dead!!* --And we never even got to second *base!*”

“Or first.”

Skyler almost chuckles to himself. In fact, he would have laughed heartily, at Zack’s mellow dramatic parody of himself, assuming he was joking-- if it wasn’t for that little extra sound of desperate, needy, vulnerable, *confused fear*-- that helpless whimper-- in his voice. Sky remembers feeling that emotion-- and making that sound-- when he was 6.

And it was no laughing matter.

So he tries to calm Zack down.

“But you don’t know she’s in trouble, Zack. She coulda just gone on early vaycay or something.”

“And let their newspaper and mail pile up, without asking their neighbor to bring it in, like The Mitchells always do?”

Whoa, now Skyler’s just a lil bit weirded out, and legally concerned, for his best friend’s state of mind, “O-- K. --You know a *LIL* too much about Laura, than I think a guy who’s NOT a part of Laura’s life, should know about Laura.”

Skyler shakes his head in awe at nervous, jittery Zack, whose eyes dart around the halls, scanning all of their passing classmates, with both silent accusation and worrisome fright.

“Did you hack her?”

Zack’s eyes widen at Skyler, “Somebody *HACKED* her?? *WHAT?! You found an AX??*”

Skyler grabs his hyperventilating friend, who apparently is not totally listening to him-- surprise surprise-- and he holds his gaze with sincere eyes.

Sure, Skyler thought Zack was overreacting, and that his overreaction was mildly entertaining-- OK, *VERY* entertaining-- but he also knew that irrational fear made people do crazy, scary, bad things. So he briefly assumed the role of all-knowing counselor.

“No, no, not HACK Laura-- *Hack* Laura. Did you *hack* into her private networks to see what you could find there?” He thinks about it for a moment-- and then he realizes, “Wait. Oh God-- Are you-- *ZACK-*”, he accuses him flatly, by his tone alone, “Are you stalking Laura?” He keeps the last line down at a hushed tone, looking to see that no one is watching or listening in on them.

Zack stares back at him like a sad naughty child. Sky’s eyes widen in realization.

“Dude! What are you *THINKING??* You can’t go around, like, *PHYSICALLY* stalking girls any more! Whada you think this is? The 90’s? Keep it online, bruh! Otherwise, you’ll scare her, and get arrested!”

“I tried that.” The sad, hopeless desperation in Zack’s voice, is like that of an adorable little 8 year old child, who just lost the ice cream scoop from his waffle cone, when it plopped into the river, as he peeked his head over the bridge, to look at all the little fishies floating by. “But it wasn’t enough. I just had to see her, man. Aw-- I miss the smell of her raspberry sherbert shampoo already...”

“Dude, you got it bad.” Skyler realizes.

“But she’s GONE dude! Like seriously WTF GONE! We have to group hack her and find out where or, how she, died.” His voice trails off as his eyes tear up.

Sky sees the pain his friend is in and sighs, “Lisette and I already tag team hacked her yesterday. We got nothin’. I have my program still constantly running even during sleep mode, to scan for any cyber heartbeats. But it hasn’t alerted me that it’s found anything yet.”

Zack whimpers again.

Sky pats his arm and shoulder blade, "It's OK, Zack. Laura can take care of herself. She comes from a family of eccentric survivalists, and I've seen her take down some huge men in our blackbelt class at the Y. --She's a tough cookie. So we'll find her."

"How alive will she be when we do?" Zack gulps.

Skyler thinks-- remembering that disturbing echo, of that screaming teen girl, in the back of his mind...

Suddenly, an ecru-hued senior of around Skyler's height, though no taller, who is muscularly built, but only just-- like a typical guy, who just works out regularly, to be at fighting power-- not a bodybuilder-- walks into a nerdy, dark-skinned Black girl with a French braid down her back. He knocks her down, along with all of her books, and instead of apologizing, picking up her books, and helping her up-- he just laughs at her like a meathead.

"Hey-- watch where you're going, *pitch black*." He chuckles evilly at the fallen girl, as he starts to walk off with his cronies.

The girl tries to hide it from her beautiful face-- but the hurt is visible-- and deep-- in her pretty, dark, dejected eyes.

First, Sky recognizes the girl's pain-- Then, he recognizes the boy's cold, pallid gray eyes. Not quite as icy and dead as his Father's-- who could turn hot lava into an arctic glacier. But icy enough to chill a hot room, even if only momentarily. A trait, no doubt, handed down to him, by his proudly psychotic Daddy-with-a-badge.

--This--

--Was Mikey Slager Jr.

Cherokee Chase-- an onlooking Native American freshman, with strong, high cheekbones, tawny skin, dark eyes, and thick, straight, pitch black hair, sees the tyranny, and sneers humorously after Junior, from the dangerous comfort of his black and silver wheelchair.

"Yeah some hero you are, Cop Kid. The 80's movies called. They want their stereotypical high school meglomaniac douche bag back."

But Junior just rolls his eyes back at him. Nothing he says could possibly matter to him-- because he's a freshman.

In a wheelchair.

And doesn't look like *him*.

However, Junior changes, when he notices the increasing number of students who crack up laughing at Cherokee Chase's crack on him.

As Junior realizes the social dynamic is slipping out of his favor and into Chase's, Skyler nudges Zack, to help him, help the mistreated girl pick up her stuff, and help her up.

Enraged by the chorus of laughing harmony, that's now uniting against him, Junior whips around and jumps in Chase's face, shoving him backwards, toward the long, winding, dark, burgundy red staircase-- threatening to drop him.

His friends all snicker at the vile madness, as other watching teens gasp and exchange confused, worried looks, like they aren't sure if this is real, or just a bad joke. Chase keeps a noble face, but his emotional eyes betray him, as he braces for the worst-- even if it breaks his neck.

"Whad you say to me, savage?" Mikey Slager Junior barks at him, "We got rid of all you red skins once. Don't think we can't do it again." There's a wild, feral, malice in Junior's eyes, that looks wicked and restless-- and a scary venom in his voice, that sounds blind and brainwashed.

It unsettles everyone, but Chase just glares murderously back at Junior, defiantly unmoved by it, "Pretending to be God is what *got* you this country. But keepin' on pretending to be God is what'll *lose* you this country. Only God is God. The rest of you are just cowardly raping murdering thieves, pretending to be something you have no comprehension of. And I don't respect dumb pretenders. So better be nice, while you're still in the majority, Oh Malignant Narcissist. Cause if not-- then when the day finally comes that *you're* in the minority-- payback's gonna be a real *bitch*."

Junior curls his lip arrogantly at him, “Oh I got your payback-- *bitch.*”

Chase closes his eyes with a pained expression, accepting his dark-- and deadly-- fate, as Junior pushes him off the top step, toward the long, winding staircase below-- and for a moment, Chase’s wheelchair really is suspended in thin air, barely touching the ground, tipped backwards, toward the cervix-snapping fall behind him.

But Skyler and Zack rush to catch Chase, grabbing his wheelchair a split second before it would otherwise fall backwards, into the diagonal, 6-foot plunge below-- and they quickly pull him back to safety-- pleasantly shocking Chase-- and everyone else watching, who was either too confused-- or too scared-- to intervene.

But now--

Sky is *pissed*.

Seething Skyler SHOVES Junior so hard that he trips backwards, on his khaki shoelaces, and almost falls down, catching himself in the arms of his 9 mean-mugging flunkies. They all just stare back at Skyler, both tough-guy fronting-- and a little unsure of how or why Sky got involved in this.

Zack watches them all carefully, as he wheels Chase out of the line of looming fist-fire, and texts Lissette fast on his cell phone, “Get the guys-- meet me n Sky by the south staircase-- need backup-- bully smackdown-- NOW!!”

Skyler ominously glides toward Junior, with a stunningly predatory look in his dark, threatening eyes.

“Yeah you a real tough guy, pickin’ on freshmans, and people less abled than you, huh Rambo? Easy targets turn you on? Huh? Why don’t ya pick on me, huh? Somebody your own size and status? Big Cop Kid-- Why don’t you pick on me? The Tall Detective’s Kid, who you know is a certified blackbelt-- who can whoop your ass. Go head Mikey Slager Junior. Son of a police officer-- Go head-- *Pick on me.*”

Sky shoves Junior, with a dangerous glare of unusual aggression. Everyone watches him, surprised. Even Junior and Zack look stunned. As do Chase and the nerdy girl, who stayed behind to watch the final outcome of this interaction.

Junior suddenly softens, looking a bit perplexed and caught off guard. The poorly masked fear in his face is refreshing, in contrast to the egomaniacally condescending malevolence, he was so accustomed to shooting at his prey-- and any casualties of his random devilry who got in his way.

“Huh-- Hey, lah-- look man, we were-- just teasin’--”

“Oh yeah? Well I’m not. So let’s go. C’mon Little Satan Junior-- Let’s go.”

Sky shoves him again, glaring into him so hard, his eyes alone nearly slit Junior’s throat.

“Dude. I aint tryna wage war with you here.” Junior tries to chuckle coolly, but it comes off sounding more like a gawky little cry. “But my pops don’t exactly like yours, so we can fight all day. I mean you maybe can fight, but it’s just one of you. And a lot of us beat cop kids. So we can do this bro.”

“What? You afraid to fight me on your own?” Skyler eerily advances on Junior, like a minacious shadow of death, as he slowly removes his black and orange sunglasses, and places them ominously into his pants pocket, as if preparing to beat Junior into next week.

Junior clumsily backs up, bumping into various, unhelpful students, and a tall bronze statue of a weeping angel, as Sky nears him.

“You can fight a kid in a wheelchair by yourself, but ya can’t fight another officer’s kid? --*BRO?*”

“Dude.” Junior almost whispers to him, trying to level with him, “Whadaya doin? Don’t be a hero man. Ya know we mess on others, but we *never* mess on our *own*. And for the gimpy new kid? Cherokee Chase? Sky-- Are you-- Are you on *drugs?*”

Junior lowers his voice on the last line, as if sincerely asking Sky this question. Skyler stares back at him. Then Sky snaps out of his zone, glances around, and realizes that everyone is staring at him-- curiously, mostly-- with battle-watching anticipation.

They all goggle at Skyler, eagerly astonished, as the rest of his friends-- Lissette, Hadji, Steven and Nathan, wheel and jog up to the scene. Junior looks around, and realizes it too. So he clears his throat, and plays along.

“Ya know, my *Soon-To-Be-Chief-Of-Police* Dad said maybe *YOU'RE* The Valentine Killer, Skyler. Says ever since you saw your Mom and bro, get jacked by some ghetto gang-bangin' street thugs from the projects, 10 years ago, you been blackin' out and losing time your whole life. Whassup with that? Think you killed your ex-girlfriend Theresa, and just forgot about it? --*Lil killah?*”

Mikey flicks the old, white, wooden Cross key chain, swinging from Skyler's side pant pocket, with the back of his index finger-- and a large fleck of white paint snaps off of it, flinging into the air, and onto the ground.

Knowing the unknown, mysterious significance of Skyler's famous signature pocket Cross, everybody gasps at this--

--including Mikey Slager Junior.

He shakes his head at Skyler with wide eyes, putting his hands up, “I didn't-- I didn't mean to do that--”.

But Sky doesn't hear this. All Skyler registers is that this racist asshole, who bullied a nerdy nice girl, and almost broke the neck, of a handicapped kid in a wheelchair, just mocked his Mother and brother's death, accused him of killing his ex-girlfriend, and then defiled one of the most important objects in his life--

--*his wilting, white, wooden Crucifix.*

Skyler picks up the now-further-chipped, white wooden Cross hanging from his pocket, and he looks at it, with a visibly eerie calm, as Junior gulps. Then he tucks the Cross safely into his pants pocket, as Junior shakes his head, with his hands up, realizing what this means.

“No--” He starts.

But the mounting, red-eyed, war-of-rage, rumbling deep inside of Skyler, erupts to the surface, like an epic spectacle of lights, as Sky suddenly SNAPS-- and CHARGES into Mikey Slager Junior-- WAILING on him--

--*HARD*--

Everyone CHEERS as Sky BEATS JUNIOR UP, and punches the crap out of him, with mixed martial arts.

--And every other fight move in his arsenal.

But then, seeing how well Skyler’s handing Junior’s butt to him on a silver platter, Junior’s 9 flunkies all jump in, and gang up on Sky, beating up on Skyler.

So Zack instantly jumps into the brawl, waving over Steven, Hadji and Lissette, who all hurry over and jump in with him, fighting both valiantly-- and humorously, with Sky.

Giddy, grinning Zack, and pissed off, furious Lissette, both land solid kicks, punches, shoves, grabs, or wrestling tackles. But nervous Steven, and delusional, out-of-breath, live-action-roleplay-zoned Hadji, add a bit of comic relief, as they yank screech-inducing wedgies, and pull shirts over goons’ heads, to blind them, tie their shoelaces together, and knock them into walls, statues-- and then each other.

A few peers laugh at the entertaining fight, as it appears to tip back in Sky’s favor, with him and his friends either having Junior’s boys cornered against the ropes, or looking down for the count-- or simply running away.

Nathan and Chase just trade humorous “Sup” solidarity nods with each other, and watch the fight admiringly, from their wheelchairs, with the hyped up crowd that cheers them all on, recording the fight on their smartphones, as Skyler takes on 2 different guys at once-- and wins.

The school janitor steps out of the supply closet, and stops to watch the fight, curiously excited, holding his mop. Hadji notices him, and in his mind, he sees a rag-tag-clad servant, in old time pauper’s clothes, handing him a sword.

“Thank you, kind servant of my kingdom, for delivering to me, my magic sword of supreme power and light.”

“What?” The janitor looks at him, totally lost, as a very confident, regal-eyed Hadji grabs the mop from him, like it’s a sword, and immediately commences into fighting off bullies with it-- like *it really is a sword*, “Hey! My *mop!*”

The janitor flinches to grab his mop back, in utter confusion, but then he pauses to watch Hadji fight off the goons, and he just stares back in amazement, as he realizes--

“Wow-- He’s pretty good with that *sword.*”

He looks on, amidst a growing crowd of awed students, who nod in agreement with him, all of them fascinated by the entertaining fight.

Hadji victoriously fights bullies off with his mop-sword, like he’s in a video game, even making goofy sound effects, whenever he makes contact with them.

“*POOF!*

“*POW!*

“*KA-JAM-MA-JAM-JAM-BAM!*”

Meanwhile, Lissette shouts at one of Junior's goons, on every punch that she lands on his face, while she's got him pinned to the ground, "STOP"-- *PUNCH*-- "BEING"-- *PUNCH*-- "A VIOLENT"-- *PUNCH*-- "ASSHOLE"-- *PUNCH*-- "AND LEAVE"-- *PUNCH*-- "MY MAN--", she thinks about it and realizes, "I MEAN-- *MY BEST FRIEND*-- ALONE!"-- *PUNCH*-- She knocks him out.

Another Junior Goon looks at her in jaw-dropped shock and awe, "What are you? Michelle Rodriguez's teen mini-me?"

Lissette grins wildly at him, with winded adrenaline pumping fiercely through her veins, "Guess so--". She eyes him, and moves toward him slowly.

He realizes she's targeted him next, and he backs up with widening eyes, tripping over the janitor's bucket of cleaning supplies behind him. Then she sprints toward him, and he runs like the wind, away from her, as she chases him.

Zack corners the bully that he's fighting, between a statue of a guardian angel, and a statue of a noble Native American Indian warrior, as he cracks his knuckles and neck at him, with a goofy grin, "Oh I'm gonna enjoy this. I been wanting to do this for a *looong* time."

But the goon just looks at him with an arrogantly pleading cut of his eyes, "C'mon man. You're one of *us*. Why ya hangin' out with all these-- *nurbins*?"

Zack furrows his brow at him in confusion, "*Nurbins*?"

"Ya know. *Nerdy urbans*. *The urban nerds*."

Zack thinks, then nods with a semi-jolt, understanding him now, "Oh-- and by, "nerdy urbans", you mean-- 'ethnic people'."

Zack's Junior Goon snorts with a shrug, "Well yeah. Why don't you just hang out with your *own* kind?"

Zack glares at him, “*YOU are NOT ‘my kind’.*” He shakes his head at him, “--And I’d rather have a mixed bag of friends, who actually care about me, *because they know me and like me*, than to have a soulless pack of rabid wild animals, who only like me, *because I look like them.*”

Zack’s Junior Goon scoffs condescendingly, “Oh come on, man. Look around you. There’s a reason why we’re the dominant race all over the globe.”

Zack smirks in awe at him, “Yeah, because we went over to everybody else’s land, ganged up on them, with an ambush of deadly weapons, and either kidnapped them, robbed them, or taught them how to behave, under our conquering rule, by raping and slaughtering the shit out of them. That’s nothing to be proud of.”

“Well you *SHOULD* be proud, because *THAT’S* what makes *US* the *WINNERS*, and everybody *ELSE* the *LOSERS*.”

“Wow--”, Zack stares at him in completely dumbfounded disbelief, “You’re not even denying past history out of shame. You’re fully aware of it-- and proud of it.”

“You should be too. I mean, we’re obviously the supreme race. You see all the movies, TV shows, books, and magazines. *We’re* the only ones who are always the heroes, the geniuses, the leaders, the good guys, the beautiful ones, the star, with the classic, epic love stories. Cause we’re the intelligent human life, and they’re animals.

--And that’s why we conquer everyone. Cause we matter-- and they don’t. That’s why our stories and relationships matter-- and theirs don’t. Because our lives and humanity matter-- and theirs don’t. Because they’re not like us. They’re different. They’re like another species. Hence why we conquer them. Because we conquer people-- *properly.*”

Zack stares at him, befuddled, “You know Skyler’s my best friend, right?”

He shrugs, rolling his eyes, “Yeah, but--”

“And you know I’m a little crazy, right?”

“Yeah, but--”

“So did you really think it was a heroic, ingenious, or good idea, to mess with the crazy guy’s best friend? A best friend who-- *I would die for?*”

He furrows his brow with wide-eyed surprise, “You would *die* for him?”

Zack nods, glaring at him with oddly excited anticipation, “Yeah. And he’d do the same for me. --So which one do you think the idea of messing with him was? Was it a ‘dominant’ idea? A ‘winning’ idea? Or a ‘supreme’ idea?”

Zack’s Junior Goon thinks about it, and gulps, realizing, “Um... Neither.”

“Mmm, neither, yeah. Not too smart on your end.” Zack nods, staring at him, “So guess what’s gonna happen here?”

He narrows his eyes back at Zack with new trepidation, “What?”

“I’m gonna come to *your* land-- right here-- right now-- ambush you with the deadly weapon of my fist, --teach *you* how to behave under *my* conquering rule, by slaughtering the shit out of *you*-- and then I’m gonna be *really* proud of myself for it afterwards. --*How does that sound?*”

He looks troubled by this, “Um-- *painful?*”

“You got that right.” Zack punches him hard in the face, knocking him to the ground, “Welcome to the winning race-- The race for racial unity, fool.” He bends over and punches him again, and then looks at him mockingly, “Am I conquering you *properly* yet?”

At the same time, Hadji gives wedgies and smacks bullies around with his mop-sword, as he envisions the entire goon fight, in his head, as a video game, in grassy, hilly, Middle Earth, with everyone dressed like warriors in Medieval Times. He chants loudly, with a booming, royal knight's voice, in his virtual reality trance, as he fights the bad boys--

"I am The Gore Lord! King of The Wizbit Tribe of Gore Lordian People, in The Hobbard-Land Kingdom of Middle Narnnyoz! You will bow down to me, you foolish peasants!"

"What?" The boys all look at him, totally bizzared out-- Then Hadji smacks them all in the face, with the mop-stick, looking crazy.

Steven anxiously shakes like a saltshaker, as he fights-- or annoys-- his Junior Goons, and then he finally wraps a bully's shirt over his head, so tight that he's stuck and can't break free of his own clothes. Then Steven chirps out a high-strung chuckle, proud of himself. But another bully runs toward him from behind. Lissette sees this, and warns him--

"STEVEN! LOOK OUT!"

Steven turns, looks, sees the other goon charging at him, and humorously screams like a girl, with a short, high-pitched shriek, freaking out, and then quickly runs to the side, out of the way, as the bully runs right into a statue, hits his head and falls back, knocked out.

Steven smiles and nods, wiping his hands as if he single-handedly knocked the goon out on his own, proudly. Lissette looks up from her fight, stunned to see this, and flashes a pleasantly-surprised-and-impressed nod at his work, as Steven showboats for her, pretending.

Then the bully wakes up and grabs Steven's ankle. Steven shrieks, jumping up and shaking, startled, and flinch-kicks him hard in the gut, on nervous reflex, putting him back out of commission, as the goon grabs his own stomach in pain.

Lisette looks up again to see Steven nodding at her with a goofy thumbs up, and she just smirks, shaking her head, as she continues to fight.

All the while, Skyler has successfully wounded or scared away 3 goons on his own, including Junior himself, using mixed martial arts-- and lots of drop-kicking in the air-- like a professionally trained action hero.

The whole school is totally ensorcelled by the entire fight, and shocked by how triumphantly well Skyler's Geek Night crew decommissioned the school's biggest-- and worst-- pack of bullies, as they all make "ooh", "whoa", and gasp sounds, at the exciting fight.

But then, suddenly, the clicking, clacking red heels of Principal Belmont, rush down the hall, and over to the brawl, as all the teens quickly hide their cameraphones from her sight, and scatter away from the scene, to let her view the fight.

She stares in shock and awe at Skyler and his friends, then whistles loudly, in her gold and white designer skirt suit. They all stop mid-punch, mid-wedgie, mid-choke, mid-wrestle, mid-sword-fight, mid-whatever, and look up at her, bruised and bloody. She glares at them all in almost frightened disbelief, and then shrieks at them with an amusingly vexed mewl.

"IN MY OFFICE! --*NOW!!!*"

CHAPTER

[16]

MEET THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE

Principal Bellmont sits in her black, leather recliner chair, kicking her feet up, on her fine, hard, reddish-brown, tropical timber desk, with a cool, ice-blue rag folded neatly atop her aching forehead, as everybody in the fight sits or stands across from her desk-- bruised, bloodied and bandaged.

--Especially Junior.

A white, ceramic mug, with a golden Cross on it, and the red word, “#blessed”, sits on her desk, holding a myriad of colorful pens and pencils, next to the old style, dark brown, wooden, half-moon clock, that ticks and tocks against the penetrating silence, as she discretely rolls her eyes to herself, in annoyed knowingness, at all the roughed-up, stinky boys, sweating up her pristine mahogany office.

Though, all of the “tough guys” staring back at her, take great strides not to be reckless enough, to spill one drop of their battle-wound blood, on her surprisingly immaculate, bright white, fluffy, wall-to-wall carpeting.

“That’s-- what happened?” She cuts her eyes at the boys-- and Lissette, “--You all seriously expect me to believe that you-- you just-- ‘saw a *rat*’-- and-- ‘*freaked out*’?”

“Yes, Principal Bellmont.” Zack shrugs boyishly, humorously-- and pretty obviously-- feigning innocence.

“And I mean,” Zack continues...

“--if it gets out how rats run rampant here, right after a mass suicide-- parents’ll get mad. Then the TV news’ll get mad. Then the inspector’ll get mad. Then all the lawsuits and lawyers’ll get mad. Then all the trials and judges’ll get mad. Then all the bad press and investors’ll get mad. Then all the big stain in the history books against the reputation of the school, will get historians mad. And then all the--”

The principal holds one hand up to silence him-- and the other one to hold the washcloth that’s soothing her headache.

“Yeah alright. You’re all dismissed. Just don’t let it happen again. Bad press or not, if you all don’t keep it under control-- I’ll tell your parents *MY* version of the story-- and I’ll make you *all* disappear.”

She nods, leans back, flips the wet towel over on her head, and pulls out a half-empty cocktail glass from behind her desk. All of them nod obediently, get up, and quietly leave.

They all pour out into the golden-tiled, rich, mahogany lobby, outside of the principal's office, where Bellmont’s aid has vanished from her vacant desk post.

But as soon as the door shuts-- Junior shoves Sky against the wall, “There are ways to get rid of you outside these school walls-- *little killah*.”

Sky shoves Junior back, to the ground. Embarrassed, red-faced Junior scrambles back up, eying his posse anxiously, as he clears his throat, and he shoots Sky a murderous look. But Sky glares at him harder, with thunderous intensity.

Junior gulps, unnerved by this, and looks away. But Junior's boys don't notice Sky's deadly demeanor-- or silent dialogue with Junior. So some of them bump into Skyler hard, as they bop by, following Junior out of the office door. Sky throws them all a serious death stare, as Chase wheels up to him, next to Nathan, who eyes him curiously.

Little killah. So Slager's son calls him that now too. This was new. Cause last year he didn't call him that. I mean, in all fairness, Skyler Stone and Mikey Slager Junior almost never talked. They had no reason to. They swam in different circles, and they were nothing alike.

But even in the brief moments when they did cross paths, in the past-- usually when Sky had to throw Junior the evil eye, to scare him away from someone he was bullying-- Junior never referred to Skyler as, "Little Killah". Not till recently. This was a new development.

Those were his Dad's words. Words he used at Theresa's murder scene. A dark and disquieting cloud of new thought suddenly rains down on Sky, disturbing him to his core...

--What do The Slagers know about Skyler, that Skyler doesn't know about himself?

Skyler starts absentmindedly rubbing his Cross again.

"Thanks for helpin'."

Chase's voice suddenly snaps Sky out of his balefully maundering thought, "You didn't have to." He shrugs, sincerely surprised, but pleasantly grateful, that somebody finally stood up to Slager's namesake, Junior.

"Yeah I did." Skyler then looks at him, "I wanted to."

Chase nods, respectfully, and wheels off, leaving the vacant office lobby. Sky's friends all look at him.

"Dude, you OK? I never seen you that amped up before. You just made your self like, a *bunch*, a powerful enemies." Zack does not look OK with this. To the contrary-- he looks like something very outlandish for him. He looks--

Responsibly concerned.

“Yeah I’m good.” Skyler just shrugs, looking forward to war when the time comes for it, “Monsters never reign forever. Eventually they all go down. --Thanks for havin’ my back today, guys.” He pulls the dark sunglasses out from his pocket and puts them on, along with his black and neon-orange motorcycle gloves, as Lissette furrows her brow in confusion at this, “But no Geek Nite today. Family matters.”

“We’ll help.” Lissette chirrups quickly.

“Nah, it’s... personal. And-- Mentor Yogi needs me for something. Training. Or whatever. Sorry. I’ll see you all tomorrow night though. Promise.”

Skyler smiles cordially at them. But they all just pout at him, each other, and the ground, like a pack of abandoned kittens. So Nathan shrugs.

“Wanna jump in...” He takes a deep, labored breath, “Our new swimming pool?” He takes a deep, labored breath, “We got free food.” He takes a deep, labored breath.

They all exclaim, excited by the prospect of new, free food. Skyler nods at them all, patting Nathan’s shoulder; a demonstrative “thank you” for quickly aiding him, as the new, fun, easy replacement, for his unanticipated departure from the group-- and he saunters out of the mahogany office lobby door, that squeaks open and shut behind him.

Hadji immediately starts playing a duo-role-play video game with Nathan, on their smart devices, like it’s all good now. But Lissette’s eyes follow after Sky curiously, wanting to follow him, instead of the group, as her Gothic dangly bling Cross earrings glimmer under a yellow-white, florescent ceiling light above them, and sunlight through the window.

Then Steven nudges Zack, “Yogi again? See what I mean?”

Zack just sort of shrugs, as he quietly pulls out his cell phone, kind of annoyed by Steven, and he text messages Skyler, “sup”.

Sky quickly texts him back, “date tonight-- dont tell”.

Zack jolts and nods, with a mischievously amused snort, clearly both pleasantly surprised, and curiously impressed. Then he quickly texts Skyler back, “who”.

A long pause goes by. Then Sky finally texts back a “B)” smiley-sunglasses emoticon, to denote how it’s a cool secret.

So Zack sucks his teeth and texts back, “WHOOOOO???????”

Finally, Skyler texts back, “she duznt go2r school”.

Zack thinks about it. Then it hits him, and he realizes who she is-- with a curious smile.

CHAPTER

[17]

MEET THERESA'S SECRET CLUB

A roughed-up looking Skyler vrooms the loud, grumbling monster engine of his neon orange and black motorcycle, up to Shy's curb, parks it on her empty driveway, and hops off.

He pulls his neon orange and black helmet off, with his leather-gloved hands, as he strolls up to her small, dark pink, patio foyer, rings her doorbell, and stares at the cute, fat, tropical yellow Cross on Shy's beige front door, anxiously awaiting her appearance.

His bruised face, bloody arm, and ripped shirt, are the furthest thing from his mind-- but for some reason, the loud, piercing bark of Shyanne's poodle, Princess, playing watch dog on the couch, as she jumps and wags her tail at him, in the big picture window, makes him feel a little self-conscious.

At least 15-- 20-- maybe even 30 seconds go by.

No answer.

Sky starts to get the impression that no one's home. Perhaps no car in the driveway should have tipped him off. After a full 60 seconds go by, he turns, walks away, hops on his motorcycle, throws on his helmet, and revs the motor again, about to leave...

...Until, all of the sudden, Shy's front door unlocks, followed by the sound of her screen door whisking open. He stops, looks up, and smiles bright, seeing beautiful, curvaceous Shyanne again, standing in front of her doorway, holding the screen door ajar, to get a better glimpse of him-- or, perhaps, to get his attention before he takes off.

Her long, smooth, café au lait legs, stream out of a short, pink, fitted, sleeveless, cotton, button-down, one-piece shorts set, with fluffy pink socks on her feet, and big, red, Christmas oven mitts on her hands.

The splashes of chunky white cooking powder flecked all over her sweet, welcoming face, and wonderful, mesmerizing cleavage, added to her striking absence of jewelry, and the strange, giant, dusty, blue-green floral church hat crowning the top of her head, as if to quickly cover up a giant bush of undone hair, suggests to him that--

Apparently, he caught her off guard.

Immediately, he turns off his bike, hops off, and jogs back over to Shy. She starts to smile, as she recognizes him with more certainty now. Then he removes his helmet, revealing the cuts on his arrestingly magnetic, and inviting face, and she gasps, seeing his ripped, bloody uniform and bruises. He simply holds up Theresa's flash drive, smiling.

"Hey Shy-- Love your work."

She just stares at him, stunned-- at a loss for words.

The silver Cross on Shy's charm bracelet shimmers and jingles as Jars of Clay's Inland Five Knives Dance Remix plays from her neon pink laptop, on the towel cabinet, while she aids enchanted Skyler, in her tropical, girly bathroom. The tile is translucent white and pink mesh. The walls pastel pink. The sink gray and purple marble, with white cabinets, and fake flowers poking out of old homey decorations.

Now wearing metallic pink-rimmed prescription glasses, to see what she's doing more clearly, Shyanne wipes Skyler's face with wet paper towels, rubs healing solution on his facial cuts, chest, and arms, and then bandages his wiry chest, clearing her throat humorously, impressed by his muscles, as he sits on the side of her white jacuzzi tub.

She sits on a pink toilet seat, between him and the open 1st aid kit on the sink beside her, wearing 2 thick, shoulder-length braids-- 1 on each side of her head-- and 1 skinny braid in front of her face, that stems from the root of her head, and reaches just past the bottom of her face. Now with his sunglasses atop his head again, and his black and neon-orange leather gloves in his pocket, Skyler pets her curious, friendly poodle, as its tail wags.

"You look like-- you got into a fight with a cat." She giggles.

"Don't worry. I won. You should see that cat. I think it only has 8 lives left." He chuckles, but she's not so amused by his wounds.

"You get into fights often?"

"No. Just when I'm defending somebody. Last time I was in a fight, I think was a year ago. When some car thief was threatening to shoot one of my friends, with a beebie gun, if she exposed him, for cheating on his girlfriend, with some creepy, perverted chick, who was goin' around givin' everybody B.J.'s. Needless to say, after I was done with him-- he never bothered her again."

"Wow." Shy looks impressed now, "So you're the town hero, huh?"

Sky laughs, "Nah. Just that guy who speaks when everybody else is afraid to."

"That's called a hero." Shyanne smiles at him.

He smiles back, "Thanks. --Ya know-- you really should put a lyric to that lick I heard you humming yesterday. I couldn't get it out of my head last night."

Shy shines at his compliment, “Oh yeah? Which one? This one?” She hums it for him and he nods, still enchanted by it. She giggles, “Aw, thanks. Maybe you’ll be the one who inspires me to finish it then, haha.”

“I’d love to be your inspiration, Miss Shy... You’re already mine.” He stares at her, sincerely laser focused.

Shy looks at Sky, pleasantly surprised and curiously charmed. Then she realizes he’s staring at her with a fiery gaze of want, demanding her deliberation-- as if hunting for her favor. Shy panics, flustered, and looks away shyly, clearing her throat.

“Kehem. Um, SO-- Back to your story-- The son of a cop bullies kids in wheelchairs? What a cowardly creep!”

Skyler concedes despondently to her abrupt change of topic, with a crestfallen glance down at the ground, “Yeah... Apparently it’s the people who give the *least* respect who demand the *most* respect. And often deserve *no* respect. You’d be surprised how many people bully the less powerful like it’s their God-ordained right.”

“You mean, more like, they think *they’re* God. So they disrespect and oppress easy targets like supremacy obsessed sociopaths. They should look in the mirror. They look more like the *devil* than like *God*.” She cuts her voice in spite.

“Nah, they just *work* for the devil. The devil’s too busy convincing everyone he doesn’t *exist*. But Team Good always wins the final battle. David beat Goliath to the ground.”

She gazes at him, then smiles, “True. But you coulda really been hurt. So few of you. So many of them. It was really brave of you, what you did, protectin’ that kid at your college like that. You’re a courageous hero.”

He clears his throat, guilty, knowing he lied to her about being in college, just so he could get her to give him the time of day, “Yeah. -- Brave or stupid. Not sure which. Either way, it got the job done. They’ll think twice before messing with the disabled again.”

“You mean “the differently abled”. She rolls her eyes with him, both chuckling, as the song changes to Israel Houghton’s funky Gospel dance track, “Love God Love People”.

He nods, “Right. Cause risking your life for somebody isn’t what matters in *our* society. It’s how far you’ll go to pretend there’s nothing wrong with them. *THAT* matters. Dumb PC Police.”

“Street police. PC Police. Everybody wants to over-police us *good* people and never themselves-- *Fascists*.”

“Yeah cause most people who *SHOULD* police society *DON’T* want to. And most people who *WANT* to police society *SHOULDN’T*. So all the *SMART* people *RUN* from guns, to go play Ghandi and Oprah *IN* society, and all the *DUMB* people *CHASE* guns, to go play Hitler and Marie Antoinette *ON* society. Manufacturing psychos-- in a broken institution, that no one has the guts or paycheck to fix.”

She stares at him, stunned, “You’re smarter than you let on.”

“I been known to have a few golden nuggets of wisdom.” He peacocks humorously, grinning slyly at her.

She giggles at his cocky charm.

“But seriously. I read your book, “I Didn’t See It Coming”. I think it’s brilliant.”

She grins, blushing, excited, “Really? Aw thanks, that’s sweet! I know I kinda ramble on a bit long about my spiritual sex philosophies and truth. Gotta learn to edit my own work.

“Well glad *somebody* read my stuff. My Mom never reads my scripts. Even when I put them in *BIG* print. And I read *ALL* of her scripts and rewrites. But-- Wait. How’d you read my book? I never showed it to anyone.” She’s confused, realizing this.

He suddenly feels awkward, uncomfortable, and red-faced, not sure how to admit that he studied up on her, before coming over to her house, without sounding like an obsessive, creepy stalker.

“Um-- Theresa-- had a file on you-- and everybody-- in her-- Valentine Killer Suspect List. Apparently, she got somebody to hack your files and create a collection of all your electronic data. Don’t feel bad. You’re not the only one who was on her list. Everyone’s on it.”

“Are you on it?”

He clears his throat, stammering timidly, “Ya know, uh, I’m not finished checking the drive. There’s probably, *loads* of people on there I know, myself, included, that-- ya know, I just haven’t, seen-- yet...”

“You’re not on the list.”

“No I’m not.”

Shy nods, a bit dispirited and downcast, “Right.”

“But-- I mean, your last name is Valentine, and you wear a pink rose in your hair 24/7. That’s probably the only reason why she distrusted you.”

He sounds hopeful, trying to make her feel better about Theresa’s lack of initial intuition with her-- as well as make himself feel better about his own.

“And the prophet seizures.”

“Right. And that. I admit-- that-- well-- I-- immediately assumed you were The Valentine Killer when I saw that. I’ve-- never met a real prophet before. Thought most of you were all just from way back in past history, like in the Bible. Not-- like-- modern day times. Then I read your file and your work and found out--”

“You read my file?”

“Well-- it was there. Theresa wanted me to read all the crazy tons of info that she crammed onto that little thing. So-- I started with names I recognized. Seems Theresa stopped suspecting you once she discovered, to her astonishment, that you actually, legitimately *ARE* a prophet.

“Though she did point out how it’s sorta weird, how you can be such a prophet with random extraneous knowledge, but then not see basic things coming. Like the series of speeding tickets you got-- that suspended your license, and took away your driving privileges.” He gazes scoldingly at her.

She looks like a funny, shamed kid, “Well *sorry!* Sometimes when I’m travelling, patience is *not* my virtue. The adrenaline zone takes me away!”

Skyler laughs, shaking his head as she blushes, embarrassed, “You’re 1 special girl, Shy. I never knew people like you existed. But Theresa grew to trust you. Calling you, quote, “a kind loner, a creative genius, and an oddly innocent, overly romantic, uniquely conservative, occasional extrovert, who hides from the world, to philosophically study it”. At least that was her take on you. When she finally decided to Cross you off her epic suspect list.”

“Aw. So sweet. Always liked Theresa. Well no. I thought she was rather uptight and frosty when we met. But then I got her to laugh, and we both shared a love of murder mysteries, so I was happy to help her case. She wasn’t one for hangout fun. Or jokes. Or creativity. But she was so committed to solving mysteries. I valued her gift for that.

“We even solved the mystery of our ancestry, and found out we’re both descendants of great African kings and queens! Oh! --And we both had being bullied in common. I got bullied by We Are God for like a year. Had to shut down and block everyone just to escape.

“Then I saw she was secretly in some bully support group called BEST, when I saw her name tag one day. She forgot to take it off. I begged her to take me with her, and she absolutely refused. Said it was a money scam. Think she was lyin’ to throw me off--”

Sky realizes, stunned-- “Whoa. Theresa was getting bullied? Why didn’t she tell anyone? Why didn’t she tell *me*? I know we-- we weren’t really close any more-- If ever. But-- That’s how Theresa first noticed me. When she saw me jump in and fight to defend Nathan from some bullies who were tryna rob him. That’s how he and I met 2 years back. He latched onto me like I was his best friend ever since.

“So Theresa knew I had a soft spot for bully victims. Why wouldn’t she tell me that she *was* one? Wow. Nobody really knew her. Except her Core 4 crew. Who are all dead now. Not even her parents knew her. Just-- To live and die and, nobody exist after you who-- knew who you really were. That’s-- worse than death. It’s-- like-- *you never even existed.*”

Shy eyes Sky, as he zones out in quiet, tearful thought, and the song changes to Derek Minor’s funky-cool rap song All Hail The King featuring Deraj and Nobigdyl. She sees him absentmindedly rubbing his Cross. So she wraps her hand around his hand, as his hand stays wrapped around the Cross. She leans in, and hugs him warmly, to comfort him.

His hand calms down, as her hand hugs his, and he warmly embraces her back, wrapping his arm around her. Eventually, she slowly pulls away. But he holds her close, not wanting to let her go, and he gazes at her. She gazes back, a bit confounded by his sudden tonal change.

He wants to kiss her.

Badly.

And now-- he can.

So he hesitantly starts to move in closer, toward her. At first, Shyanne looks desiring, in a confused and startled way-- but her unsure anxiety, cautious reservations, and demure, old-fashioned style win out-- and she nervously turns away from him, moving to get up.

But Sky stops her, grabbing her hand tenderly, and pulling her closer to him. She catches herself on his bare, brawny chest, as he touches the side of her face softly with his other hand, and holds her waist, caressing her face and neck gently.

Enamored, she stops resisting, as he gazes hungrily at her glossy, blushing lips. Again, Sky moves in to kiss her. She doesn't pull away from him this time. His ample lips are only half an inch away from hers.

But then suddenly, the dog starts barking like crazy-- loudly-- out in the livingroom, making them both jump and pull away from each other, amused by their own skittishness. Shyanne clears her throat and takes that as her cue to leave. So she stands up, packs up her first aid kit, and opens the mirrored medicine cabinet door above the sink.

"I guess you're all bandaged up and ready to fight another fight now, huh?" She giggles rather nervously, as she places the first aid kit back inside the medicine cabinet.

But he's not giving up that easily.

"Uh huh." He quietly gets up, and steps up behind her.

"Well, glad I could try to make you feel a lil better--"

As Shyanne closes the medicine cabinet, Skyler eases his left hand on top of hers, and intertwines his long, strong fingers with hers, lightly pressing the palm of her hand against the mirror on the medicine cabinet door in front of her. She gasps, startled by his sudden presence behind her, and his startlingly confident physical dominance over her, however serene it is.

But she doesn't stop him.

--Yet.

“What-- are you doing?”

Her voice is lilting. Almost flirting. But sounds genuinely inquisitive. She’s curious to hear his answer-- but she has an idea what he’s after. He wants a kiss. Just like all the other boys do. Of course, they never get it. She never wants their kiss. But him-- he was dangerous.

Because Skyler’s kiss--

--*she wanted.*

She would never tell him that. But it looks like he’s already figured it out. Even before she did. Which frightens her. She didn’t realize until this very moment, how badly she wanted him to kiss her. But he seemed to know. And it scared her. So she asks him what he’s doing, not because she doesn’t know. But because she doesn’t know if she should let him.

So she’s buying time to think about it.

“Auditioning to be your man.” He answers her honestly-- and smartly-- with a bit of humorous, flirty jest in his voice, as he gently holds her waist, and softly caresses her stomach, with his free hand, kissing her shoulder inward, until his soft, warm lips, reach the silky nape of her neck.

Without realizing it, she melts into his arms, closing her eyes, with breathy words, “No one ever gets this close to me.”

“Why not?” He kisses her neck softly...

“I don’t let them. They all try. But I never let them.”

“So why let me?” He kisses her neck softly...

“I don’t know. It’s-- crazy. I-- I don’t even know you.”

Suddenly, Sky whips Shy around by the waist and confines her body between his right arm and her bathroom sink, as he presses his right hand against the wall beside her ear, and gently strokes her soft, velvety face, with his left hand.

“Would you like to?”

His eyes stare deeply and intensely into hers, as if reaching for her soul, but the slight glint of flirty mischief, impishly smirking through his fierce passion, suggests a smiling playfulness that lightens the mood and puts her at ease.

--A bit.

Shyanne still just stares back at Skyler, in cautious curiosity and fearful admiration.

Primarily afraid of herself.

Skyler can read her leeriness and awe. He's excited about Shyanne, and curious himself, to see if actually acting out any parts, from all of those romance novels, with which he schooled himself-- actually work.

And apparently--

--*They work wonders.*

The song changes to *NSYNC's "I Want You Back", as Sky watches Shy's eyes fixate on a bead of sweat, that rolls down his glistening, beefy upper arm-- which was usually covered by a T-shirt or a school uniform, but was now free and unburdened by the conformity of civilization.

He didn't realize how much the natural power of his strapping masculinity could have on a girl, especially a nice girl-- a good girl-- a smart girl-- like Shyanne Valentine.

Realizing she's mildly entranced by his glistening virility, Skyler takes this moment to replace Shyanne's humorously stunned and flustered, silent gaze-- with a kiss.

He takes her hand, places it on his sturdy chest, which totally distracts her, and as she stares at his powerful trunk, he slowly leans in, again, to kiss her-- this time, only a breath away from her lips... -- when the front door SLAMS SHUT, in the livingroom, startling them both-- and they hear the youthful voice of an older woman shout:

“SHY! I’m back from my massage and stopped by the store! Bring the stuff in from the car! Who’s motorcycle is that parked outside? If its a neighbor’s guest’s I want you to go over and tell them to move it.”

Shy and Sky laugh, shyly pulling apart from each other, with bashfully blushing smiles.

“Hey. After I meet Mom, explain the motorcycle, and help ya bring in “*The Stuff*”, why don’t I break ya outta here? Take the princess from her tower and we just-- hang out? *MY* license is *NOT* suspended, cause unlike *YOU*, I’m a *SAFE* driver who *RESPECTS* the law.” He laughs, teasing her.

She nudges him, defensively, giggling, “A safe driver on an unsafe machine.”

“Better than being stuck in your royal prison here forever. Hey. I promise to keep you safe. Pinky swear.” He holds up his pinky finger for her.

She just stares at it, and then at him, skeptically.

“And what about your clothes? You can’t run around town in ripped up, bloody clothes like that. --Not with me.”

He chuckles at her social fashion grace rules of engagement, and nods reassuringly to her.

“Got street clothes in my backpack. Gotta keep it handy just in case, ya know? And you got my word, I’ll give you a good, safe ride. Deal?” He wiggles his pinky finger at her.

She laughs involuntarily, making him chuckle, and then she looks back at him, seriously. Finally-- slowly-- she wraps her pinky finger around his-- still looking leery.

First he smiles. Then he furrows his brow, realizing, “Is that *NSYNC?” He looks at her with a laughing expression, “You still listen to old-school boy band songs??”

She blushes with humorously surprised eyes, suddenly realizing the personal nature of her playlist, “Hey-- I LOVE *NSYNC-- even though-- they-- kinda-- don’t exist any more...” She realizes, “And if I like them, and you like me, then that means you like them too.” She pokes him like a kid.

“Hey, it’s cool, I like them too--” He laughs, raising his hands up in concession. “I get it. You like youthfully well-dressed guys, who do commercially memorable dance moves for you, as they serenade you with classically clean, catchy, upbeat, emotionally honest love songs.” He chuckles, trying to repress full laughter, “So-- does this mean I have to like The Backstreet Boys too?” He titters, trying not to laugh.

“No.” She folds her arms, “But it would be preferable.”

He can’t help but crack up laughing at her secret teenybopper love affair with bubblegum pop love songsters.

Then, suddenly, Shyanne’s Mom pops into the bathroom, opening the door without knocking, and gasps, seeing half-naked Skyler pinky-locked with Shyanne’s pinky finger. She’s a bit lighter and yellower than her, and a few inches shorter, with shoulder-length, golden brown hair, and sweet dimples on a pretty face. She wears a mystical, blue, long-sleeved shirt and pants set, with artistically painted black musical symbols dancing all around it.

“What-- Who’s this?” Shy’s Mom eyes them both with a very surprised stare, as if not use to seeing other people in their house.

Shyanne immediately blurts out the situation, as Skyler immediately blushes, and waves politely at Mrs. Valentine, before grabbing his shirt and throwing it on, over his head.

“Mom-- this is Skyler Stone. Skyler, this is my Mom.”

“Hi-- how are you, nice to meet you, Mrs. Valentine.” Sky extends his hand to her, as soon as he pops his head and arms through his shirt, as the song changes to The Backstreet Boys’ “Everybody-- Backstreet’s Back”.

She shakes his hand, still sizing him up, and glances over at Shy for a real explanation.

“He’s Theresa’s friend. That genius, son of a detective that I told you about, who Theresa tasked with the job of finishing her case on The Valentine Killer or whatever? He just got in a fight at his college at Midtown University, where cop kids were beating up on a guy in a wheelchair--”

“Actually, it was-- just 1 guy.” Sky chuckles nervously, “And-- he was trying to push him down a flight of stairs. It just-- became a big ole thing. Cause then when I fought him, his friends jumped in. And when they fought me... --my friends jumped in. But in the end, --we saved the kid from getting his neck broken, so-- it was a good day.”

“Yeah-- See, Mom? He’s a hero!” Shyanne beams proudly.

“Why’s he half-naked in here?” Mom is still befuddled.

“Oh, I was just bandaging him up some. He had a few cuts and bruises from the fight.”

“Uh huh.” Mom just stares between the 2 of them, “So, what, is he your boyfriend now?”

“Mom!” Shy blushes furiously.

“Hopefully, heheh.” Skyler grins humorously at Shyanne.

Mom nods, “OK. Well nice to meet you, handsome, genius Skyler Stone. Maybe you can get my beautiful, genius daughter, Shyanne Valentine, to go get a job, do a better job of cleaning the house, and remember to turn stuff off, so I don’t have to keep coming up behind her and doing it for her all the time, like a child. Get her to grow up, so everything’s not on me and my social security check all the time. You know about her illness, right?”

Skyler looks a little confused and unsure, as he glances curiously between embarrassed, slowly fuming Shyanne, and her totally aloof-seeming Mother, “Her illness?”

“The seizures. She’s sick. You know that, right?”

“Oh. Yeah yeah. I, I know. I-- saw it happen-- already.”

Mrs. Valentine nods, “Good. My daughter’s a gorgeous talented girl, with a wonderful pure spirit, and a lot to offer. But she’s a big ole mess, with no coping skills, not a very good listener, her life’s a friggin’ disaster; and we really gotta work on improving her sensitivity skills. To make her more sensitive to other peoples’ feelings. She’s so self-righteous, she can’t see anyone else’s point of view or take criticism. And she can cook-- but she’ll eat you out of house and home. So you’re in for a very stressful ride.”

Skyler looks at Shyanne, a bit taken aback, and realizes Shyanne is just staring angrily at the sink now, as her Mom rattles on, completely unaware of it.

“Oh...Kay...” Skyler really doesn’t know what else to say to that. He knew all parents had their moments of unintentionally undermining their kids, but, putting himself in Shyanne’s shoes-- if his Dad ever betrayed him the way Shyanne’s Mother just betrayed her-- he would never introduce his Dad to anyone that ever came into his life, ever again.

Like--

--*EVER*.

And it strikes Sky as both baffling and bewildering, how ironically Mrs. Valentine spoke, about teaching Shyanne to be more sensitive to other peoples’ feelings, when she, herself, was so obviously-- and comically-- insensitive to Shyanne’s.

But he’d witnessed the epic fights between Mothers and daughters, on reality TV shows and web videos-- sometimes shouting at each other to “eat crap and die”-- or throwing things at each other and getting into actual catfights. Though that level of line-crossing and boundary-bombing, was all mostly with the Mothers and daughters, who were only a few years apart from each other in age.

Unlike Shyanne and her Mom.

But either way-- He isn't gonna touch that with a 10 foot pole.

Because he knows-- that one bitchy, manipulative, "I WISH YOU WERE NEVER BORN, YOU UNGRATEFUL LITTLE BITCH!" from Mrs. Valentine, and their whole night would be shot to hell.

Some things--

--kids never forget.

So Skyler just smiles and nods politely at Mrs. Valentine, both to defuse any possible family fight about to break out-- judging by the look of increasing rage on Shyanne's face-- and to prevent Shy's Mom from completely souring Shyanne for the day, killing the mood, and putting Shy in a bad funk, that will cloud over their evening, and ruin all the fun he hopes they'll have together--

--without supervision.

Mrs. Valentine calculates his response, assesses it-- and him-- as respectful enough, and looks back at her daughter, as if everything is fine, and nothing is wrong.

"Shyanne-- There's a bunch of groceries in the car. Have your boyfriend help you bring them in. And remember to take out the trash, fix my toilet, caulk the porch ceiling, repair the door, move those heavy bins for me, patch up the window, mulch the yard, screw that fixture back in place, kill the ants, replace the AC filter, and open that tough jar of pickles that's stuck too tight."

Mom steps back into the hall, opens her bedroom door, and goes inside, carrying a loud plastic bag that sounds like it has a bottle of store-bought pills rattling around inside it, "Oh-- And come out of the bathroom. I have to use it."

Shyanne merely yanks the bathroom door shut, with a silent, biting glare-- as if she has a lot to get off her chest-- stuff that won't be taken seriously by her Mother, if she even bothers. But she's not going to pointlessly speak her mind in front of Skyler, who, apparently, was too new to argue in front of.

Skyler gazes back at her with a mischievously curious little smirk, “Care to vent?”

Without a second of hesitation, Shy pours all her guts out to Sky in a fast, furious flurry of nonstop word vomit, as the song changes to The Backstreet Boys’ “Quit Playing Games With My Heart”.

“OH MY GOSH-- She always says how I need to look at things from other peoples’ point of view, but whenever we have a spat, she never sees MY point of view. And she calls ME the self-righteous one, yet SHE’S the one who apparently is NEVER wrong-- and quick to inform you how NEVER wrong she is, because she’s ALWAYS RIGHT, ALL THE TIME-- and how I better accept it or else, “we’re gonna have a problem”, Shy arches her fingers in air quotes.

“And if you ever even TRY to tell her about herself-- that she’s done something wrong-- or done something that upset you-- even in the nicest, most civil, most polite... and respectful way-- she immediately either explodes or attacks *YOU and YOUR* attitude, turning it around, so it still becomes a conversation about all the things that are wrong with *YOU*, and how you’ve wronged *HER*, and done *HER* wrong somehow.

“Or she simply shuts you down by pulling parental rank, or age rank on you. And she breathes dragon fire on your face. Then suddenly melts into a pool of crocodile tears. Mellow-dramatically transforming the entire discussion, into a theatrical production about *HER*, and how *SHE’S* the victim, and *YOU’RE* the villain, NO MATTER WHAT SHE DID WRONG--

“It still always has to go back to her being the victim, and you being the villain. Even when *SHE’S* the villain, or *YOU’RE* the victim-- or BOTH. But that’s just not possible. It’s not even *fathomable* in her worldview.

“And she basically sticks her fingers in her ears, going ‘LA LA LA, I CAN’T HEAR YOU, JUST SUBMIT TO ME OR DIE’ until you submit-- or pretend to submit-- to her viewpoint or her version of the truth, or her effort to take every issue between you, and turn it into another martyr drama about herself, and how *YOU’VE* affected *HER*--

“Clearly disinterested in how her faults or mistakes have made *YOU* feel-- but that’s because she’s faultless and never makes any mistakes. So you must bend to her will and kowtow to her belief, and her victimization-focus on herself, or her villainy-focus on you-- even when she’s wrong. Which she will never admit to being-- *because she is never wrong*.

“It’s so *infuriating*! Then one minute, she expects me to be a friggin’ mind-reader, and the next, she’s micro-managing the crap out of me. And she’s not happy till I explain myself for every little nuance of every little thing, like, every 2 friggin’ seconds, like I’m a friggin’ 4 year old.

“And then she’s like, “Oh don’t tell all my business or throw me under the bus”. But then she’s like the *FIRST* one to tell all *MY* business and throw *ME* under the bus-- always telling on her mom n daughter --but yet she goes *bonkers* whenever we tell on her *back*.

“You don’t demand the respect of a king, from someone to whom, you don’t even give the respect of a pauper-- and then wonder why they have resentment issues with you. I just-- I’m just so *sick* of this *vertical* dynamic. It’s getting *TOXIC*. I need a close, horizontal relationship, for once in my life-- to rescue me from this emotional hell. --One that *lasts*.

“Oh!” She recalls, “And my ex-boyfriend-- who SHE defended-- shortly after he treated me like CRAP-- HE even told me that he hoped I never became like her. But she didn’t know that when she actually played devil’s advocate, with a friggin’ sneer on her face, across from me, at the breakfast table, as she nastily took his side, or “his point of view”, after I complained about him, while she and I had a battle of the wills, back when we took Gran to a diner last summer.

“So she’s so sincerely sure she’s totally on my side and totally pure of all malice, ill will, or evil intent. Like she’s the only 1 in my corner. And pure like the driven snow. --*But she will rip my heart out, and slap me in the face with it-- proudly--* in a New York minute, as soon as it suits her-- if I don’t kowtow down to her, and let her comfortably lock her claws into me, any time or way she feels like it.

“I feel like she’s only on my side, when I excessively submit to her 110%, and bend to her emotional point of view, like a 4 year old. But with a job. So basically... I have to be this always-yielding, always-wrong, always-agreeing, always-easily-manipulated toddler. Who stays cheerfully under her thumb. And pays the rent. And never thinks she’s wrong.”

She thinks about it, “So really, she just wants me to be the beaten-down, p-whipped, weary husband, that she never wanted, and could never settle down for, after dad died.

“*I hate it!*” Shy shudders in explosive frustration. “*She just needs a man. I just need a man. We both just need a man. So we can stop fighting each other, so she can stop wasting all of her feminine manipulation and emotional control freak energy on ME, and so I can stop resenting her for it-- so we can both focus all our excess energy, on building a lasting legacy of love, with our equal-opposite energy force.*

“CAUSE WOMEN WERE NOT BUILT TO BE ALONE LIKE THIS. --OBVIOUSLY.”

She looks back up at Sky, and gasps, realizing she’s just dished out a mouthful, “I’ve said too much, haven’t I?”

Skyler gives her a funny look, as the song changes to *NSYNC’s “Giddy Up”, and he cracks up, laughing at her sudden self-awareness, after that speeding bullet-train of youthfully angry frustration.

Then he looks understandingly and affectionately at Shyanne, and lifts her chin up with his curled index finger. She looks back up at him, repressing humiliated fury and unresolved angst, behind her seething, glistening eyes.

“Hey-- Everybody’s parents’ frustrate and embarrass them. You’re not alone. Heck-- a cool celeb even made a song, along time ago, about how *sometimes parents just don’t understand*.” He mimics the song humorously, and chuckles kindly with her, making her laugh a little.

She smiles as she breaks into a giggle, as if she was so mad, she wasn’t expecting to laugh, but now she’s revived by it. Like it’s a long-needed medicine. She hugs Skyler tight.

“I can’t believe Theresa let you go.” She whispers into his chest.

He smirks to himself in amused and flattered wonder, “Me neither.” He thinks about it more, for a beat. Then he looks down at Shyanne, and kisses her forehead sweetly, just embracing her warmly, in a friendly, innocent hug.

BAM BAM BAM!

Her Mom knocks hard, loud and fast on the door, making them jump out of their skin, with a startled jolt-- totally tensing their vibes.

“--OUT!” Mrs. Valentine shouts.

Skyler looks at disturbed Shyanne, “You ready to giddy up?” He laughs, bopping goofily with the song.

“Shut up--” She laughs with him, smacking his chest, as she grabs her purse, “Yes I’m ready to giddy up. --Let’s go.”

CHAPTER

[18]

MEET SKYLER'S STALKER

Outside, in Shyanne's driveway, helmeted Skyler pulls out a 2nd helmet, from one of the compartments, on the side of his motorcycle, and he puts it on Shy's head, playfully snuggling it around her angelic face, making her giggle, as he smiles coolly, and inquires to her comfort. She nods to him that she's good to go, in her feminine, pink peasant blouse and long, flowy, white summer skirt, with her bushy curls out to her shoulders, beneath a stylish white wool cap.

He too has had a change of clothes, now wearing long, loose, dark, black jeans, and a big, solid, red, soft cotton T-shirt, with a few solid, black, horizontal stripes of varying sizes, stretching across his chest, along with his black and orange leather motorcycle gloves on.

"Hey-- I got a song that's perfect for you. You can hear it in the speakers in the helmet. Tell me what you think." He chuckles to himself, as he flips through his iPod and plays Will Smith's Parents Just Don't Understand, teasing her.

It takes Shy a moment, but then she realizes the song and sucks her teeth, nudging Skyler, "Oh ha ha, very funny."

Sky cracks up into chuckling laughter, as she shakes her head at him. He teasingly ingratiates her to his bike, as Lissette hides, in a parked, blotchy red, beat-up two-seater car, across the street. She watches them, in tearful shock.

--Which visibly morphs into palpable contempt.

She wears an urban, camouflage, stylized spaghetti string shirt, with the words "Boss Bitch" on it, in elegant font, and black short jeans shorts that read, "JUICY" on the butt and the front, in diamond print.

She grabs her phone, calls Sky's number and watches him. He feels a vibration in his pocket, pulls his phone out, looks at it, sees that Lissette is calling him-- and turns his phone off. Then he gets on his motorcycle with Shy, and pulls his keys out from his pocket.

She glances at his signature, fading, white, wooden Cross, hanging from his motorcycle key chain, and she smiles curiously at it, wondering what it means to him. Then Skyler plays Lecrae's song "Gravity" through the built-in speakers in his and Shy's helmets, from his iPod, he VROOM VROOMS his bike loudly-- and he rides off, down the street. Lissette scowls at them in livid fury, as they fade away into the distance.

Exhilarated Sky takes freaked out Shy on a motorcycle ride through their little city town. He grins, invigorated, and she squeezes him tight, petrified, as they whip through the busy streets, past driving cars, with wind swishing loudly in their ears, and against their faces. She shrieks at the sight of a nearby truck. He laughs at her fear as he smoothly glides around it.

What he doesn't know is that--

--Lissette is watching them.

--Only a couple of cars behind them.

Skyler and Shyanne roll up to the movie theater by the mall, with its soft, glowing, cinematic lights, long lines of loud chatter, and the smell of butter and popcorn floating by. Lissette parks her car, buys a ticket, and follows them into the theater-- inconspicuously.

Inside, Sky and Shy saunter into an action comedy, and sit near the middle. Lissette sits a few rows back--

--watching them.

The audience laughs at a funny scene, but a rude guy, in the row in front of them, turns around and barks at Shyanne like an angry geek.

“HEY NERD-- SHUT THE HELL UP AND STOP LAUGHING SO LOUD!”

Lissette grins wickedly, hiding secretly behind Shyanne.

Shy is so caught off guard by it, she just gasps and stares at him, not even sure if he’s talking to her, until her eyes stay on him long enough to see, that his eyes are glaring right into hers.

There’s no kindness in them.

Sky snaps out of his movie laughing zone, stops eating the salty, buttery popcorn in his hand, from the bucket in his lap, and he seeks out who spoke. His eyes quickly find the rude guy-- and he instantly mocks his voice and manner.

“*HEY DORK-- SHUT THE HELL UP AND STOP WHINING LIKE A LITTLE BITCH!*” Sky parodies him humorously, making him sound like a total spaz. Then Sky throws a few kernels of popcorn at Rude Guy’s face, with a tough guy “I dare you” smirk.

Nearby fellow audience members laugh at this, and the fuming Rude Guy turns beat red, embarrassed, as he looks around at the local chuckles, now being had at his expense. Defeated, he turns back around and shuts up.

Skyler smirks at him, unimpressed-- almost as if he was expecting more of a fight than he got.

--Maybe even hankering for one...

Shy looks over at Sky, admiring him with new appreciation-- respect-- and wonder.

Skyler and the audience laugh again at the movie, but Shy is still staring at Sky. She kisses his slightly gravelly, but clean-shaven, cheek softly, and lingers, pulling back slowly. He looks at her, stunned and curious, breaking out of his movie watching zone again.

She smiles affectionately and adoringly at him, wraps his arm around her shoulder, and rests her head on his chest, smiling proudly. He suddenly realizes why, holds her tight, and kisses her forehead-- smiling back proudly.

Lisette looks FURIOUS, and most of all--
--*jealous*.

That was the kind of thing he use to do for *HER*.

And *ONLY* her.

Well... not *ONLY* her...

--BUT *MOSTLY* HER.

And now he's doing it for THAT *her*.

Shyanne Valentine.

She couldn't believe it.

She couldn't bare it.

And more importantly--

She *wouldn't* put up with it.

So she gets up and leaves.

...*But*-- she can't just *leave* and *NOT* watch what happens, as this completely *random* new girl *who doesn't even go to their school* (as far as she knows)-- where she can keep a close eye on them-- just horn in on *her* turf and take *her* man like this.

So she waits outside, until the movie is over.

Later, Skyler takes Shyanne to a diner in the mall, and buys them both some grub. Lissette sneaks in and sits in a seat directly behind Skyler, and holds up a giant menu-- waving the server to go away-- as she tries to hear Sky's conversation.

Shy orders the big burger with giant onion rings and thick french fries that she sees in the menu photo. But what the server brings Shy looks laughably different from the photo in the menu-- a half-cooked sliver of weak-looking meat, burnt little broken pieces of what MIGHT be onion rings, and just a few small fries to top it off.

Shyanne pouts at this. Then their server asks them if they need anything. Shy's about to speak, but sees Sky staring at her, and remembers how her ex always use to take the side of the neglectful people who got her order wrong, in the past, and how he made her feel bad, for wanting decent service, instead of taking her side-- which he *never* did.

Not wanting to go through that dark feeling of unexpected alienation and truth-shaming again-- she begrudgingly shakes her head at the server, to be polite.

The courteously aloof server nods, and starts to leave. But Skyler notices Shyanne's restrained discontent, and stops the server. He asks Shy what's wrong. She shakes her head. He asks again. Finally, she points to the photo of her meal in an advertisement on the table, then points to her dish to show that it's completely different.

Skyler asks the server to fix it. The server nods, taking Shyanne's food and menu, and brings them to the Cook.

The cook rolls his eyes, nods, and gives the server a meal that looks more like the photo in the menu. The server brings it to Shy, who grins gleefully and claps her hands at it, ecstatic now.

Skyler nods at the server, happy that Shyanne's happy now, and the server walks away.

Then Skyler grabs Shyanne's hands, and bows his head. She gasps in touched joy, watching him, and quickly bows her head with him. He sends a brief thank you prayer, up to God, to bless their food, then squeezes her hands, grins at her, and claps his own hands now, happy to eat.

She keeps her hand outstretched to him and gestures for him to grab it again. He looks, realizes this, takes her hand again, and stares at her with abruptly intense curiosity. She just gazes back at him, smiling, and squeezes his hand warmly, rubbing his hand with her thumb.

He smiles, and wraps his fingers in hers again, gazing back at her wantingly. The server returns to refill their drinks. They pull apart from each other, to allow her to work, but remain intensely locked on each other's eyes, as their server talks and laughs, working the table between them.

Lisette is *green* with envy--

--and *rage*.

--*Valentine Killer* level rage.

After dinner, Sky escorts Shy into the bookstore at the mall. Lisette trails far enough behind them to see what they're doing without them noticing her. Sky and Shy sit together at the cafe, reading books to each other.

Skyler grabs a feather pen, and teases Shyanne with it, getting a rise from her, as she giggles, trying to catch it. Eventually, she shivers, holding herself, cold. He puts his jacket around her. She smiles at him, and he smiles back.

Lisette crushes a clear, plastic cup of lemonade in her hand, in anger, watching them. She scowls at it, as it spills all over the cafe table and floor. Skyler turns to look at her. She gasps and holds up a giant newspaper to block him from seeing her.

Then Sky notices, as a cafe attendant offers to clean up Lissette's area, and she waves him away brusquely, holding up her newspaper. The confused cafe attendant just gapes at her, surprised and offended by her rude dismissal, and walks away, shrugging at his manager, who watches from the cafe food counter, bewildered.

Skyler looks at the mess on the floor, and then back up at the increasingly wet newspaper, that's skimming the liquid on the tabletop, as Lissette holds it up, and he just raises his eyebrow in a funny expression, casually weirded out by the bizarre scene.

When they're done at the bookstore, Skyler and Shyanne finally find themselves laughing insatiably, as they goof around a hot topic type Gothic shop in the mall, putting on goofy costume masks and funny head gear, playing and teasing each other.

Lissette wears a ridiculously hideous witch mask, to hide herself from them, as she watches them. Skyler glances at her, realizing that she's watching them. She quickly looks away, and walks behind a tall costume rack, out of sight. He looks down, thinking.

Outside of the shop, Skyler leads Shyanne over to a pretty water fountain, lit up with colorful flashing lights of pink, blue, purple, green, yellow, red, etc.

Lissette hides behind a vendor, who tries to sell her laughably overpriced body lotion products. He won't leave her alone, until she lets him demonstrate his product on her.

Finally-- she lets him lather up her arm with pale pink lotion, and rub it down with his magic massage device, that apparently comes with it, for only 3 installments of \$19.95. Even though, she's pretty sure, she saw an exact knockoff of that exact same product for \$9.99 at Walmart.

Lisette ignores her “free demonstration”, as she watches Skyler pull out a couple of coins, and tell Shyanne to make a wish at the fountain.

Shy laughs, turning to leave, like she knows he’s not serious. But he grins, stopping her, and nods back at the fountain, telling her to make a wish-- *seriously*.

She eyes him curiously, with a fascinated smile. Finally, she nods and eyes the fountain. He gives her a coin and asks if she’s ready. She nods, giggling at the prospect.

On the count of 3, they both throw their coins into the fountain, close their eyes, and make a wish. He wraps her up in a big bear hug, that lifts her up off the ground, kissing her cheek merrily, making her giggle, as he lifts her hand with his, victoriously shouting in feigned awe to the world:

“I GOT MY WISH!”

Shy laughs, shaking her head, amused, as the nearby laughing crowd applauds them, playfully cheering on Sky’s wish. Shyanne gazes at him with an admiring smile, clearly infatuated with him.

Lisette frowns at them, as her salesman pitches his closing “Buy Me” spiel, and asks her for the sale. She sees Skyler swagger off with Shyanne, further into the mall, and she darts toward them. But Vendor Sales Guy hops in her way, with a winning smile, to get her to take another look at his product, and every time she moves to get away from him--

--There he is again!

--Popping up in front of her!

--Moving with her in unison!

--Like her shadow twin!

--Blocking her from leaving his relatively small radius of the mall.

It surprises Lissette that Vendor Sales Guy still has all his teeth.
--Because if he does this to everyone-- surely somebody must have just lost it and beat the shit out of him by now-- Right?

Apparently not.

Apparently he's new to rejection.

Or numb to it.

And now he won't accept Lissette's rejection, as he repeatedly blocks her path-- letting her prey-- get away.

So Lissette introduces Vendor Sales Guy to rejection--
--by headbutting him in the face.

As he falls to the bright, shiny, marble tiled floor, stunned into a moment of unconsciousness, Lissette grabs the free sample that he promised her at the beginning of his spiel, from his temporarily comatose hand, steps over his half-knocked-out, half-dazed-and-confused body, and urgently jogs over into the direction that she last saw Skyler and Shyanne go.

A few people, who saw what happened, watch the groggy, confused Vendor Sales Guy stagger around on the floor, in jaw-dropped shock, as a couple teenagers laugh at Lissette's brazenly Neanderthal headbang, in mesmerized awe.

Near another fountain, Skyler wins Shyanne a big pink stuffed toy bear at a slot machine, still in the mall. She hugs Sky for this and kisses his cheek humorously, in quick, multiple kisses, as she hugs her new lovable toy. He blushes, smiling. Lissette catches up with them, just in time to see this, and she goes apoplectic.

A giddy little boy sashays by, holding his peaceful Mother's hand, as he licks a triple scoop strawberry ice cream cone. Lissette grabs his ice cream cone and smacks the ice cream into his face. Ice Cream Boy gasps at this and almost *IMMEDIATELY* starts crying. His Mother goes *MAD, SCREAMING BLOODY MURDER* at Lissette.

So Lissette grabs the ice cream cone sticking out from the little boy's face-- and smacks it into his Mother's face-- shocking her into abrupt silence.

Then Lissette looks back-- and sees that Sky and Shy are gone. She gasps, and runs out of the mall, looking for them.

It's nightfall now, as Sky and Shy finally leave the mall. While walking to the garage, to find his motorcycle, she asks him something that's been bugging her all night.

"So you've mentioned your Dad. You've mentioned your friends. You've mentioned Theresa's Core 4. You've even mentioned your dog, Einstein. But... what you haven't mentioned-- is your Mom. Did she and your Dad get divorced?"

"What? Oh-- Nah." Sky shakes his head no. But he doesn't answer the question.

"Sooo... What happened?" She giggles slightly, confused by his close-mouthed reaction, "They're still together, but it's complicated?"

"Nah, she-- I-- I'd rather-- not talk about it. Why don't we just go hang out at my house for a bit and play some pool?" His fingertips find the flaking, wooden Cross hanging from his pocket, and start absentmindedly rubbing it again.

She scoffs in a giggling tone, "Ugh-- Skyler-- I *never* go to guys' houses, unless we're just platonic friends. Or I know him well enough to consider us an official item. Or I *think* I know him. Can't exactly help it if a guy magically manages to hide who he really is from me. And then he baits and switches up on me, months later. Making me despise... the whole dating farce. And much of humanity. --But *any way*." She realizes she's quickly wandering *way* off topic.

“This is only my 2nd day meeting you, and you want me to go all the way to your house “to play pool”-- which, to me, means “actually playing pool”. But for all I know, you might think it means something *completely* different.

“And you expect me to trust you on your word, that you’re not secretly, at *BEST*, a *creep*-- or at *WORST*, a *serial rapist*-- or *murderer*. But you won’t even tell me about your family life? If you don’t trust me with basic online dating profile questions, how am I supposed to trust you enough to go “play pool” at your house?”

He looks at her seriously, and for the first time, solemnly, before he looks down in thought-- and he speaks quietly-- and measured-- in a grave tone.

--A tone that’s strikingly different from his charming, playful, youthfully aggressive, devil-may-care swag of personality, that’s delightfully trademarked their whole night together thus far.

“She died.” He says simply, “With my big brother.” He adds curtly, “When I was 6.”

“Oh-- Oh my-- Oh-- Skyler-- I’m so sorry--” Shyanne suddenly realizes, touching his forearm sympathetically, “Car crash?” She assumes.

Skyler shakes his head, looking down, “Bad cops.”

--“Bad cops?” She’s confused, “What-- whadoyou mean? Some dirty cops just-- burst into your house, executed half your family-- and got away with it?”

“No. Some dirty cops just-- pulled us over one day, when they saw a pretty lady driving an old, but still flashy, expensive race car, with her tall, laughing, 16 year old son in the passenger seat, who they probably mistook for somebody older-- or even if they didn’t, it didn’t matter.

“They saw what they wanted to see in us, and they pulled us over. But when they first pulled up, they didn’t see me. Cause I was bored that day, and started playing with the trick back seat, that opened up into the trunk. And I was joking around with my brother, playing hide and seek, and Mom got mad, telling me to stop, cause it wasn’t safe.

“So I came out, and that’s when I heard the sirens. I saw Sirius look at Mom like something was wrong. But I didn’t understand what he was saying to her. Or maybe I just don’t remember. But I do remember a look of-- concern-- or-- confusion-- on his face.

“Cause I guess we were driving under the speed limit, and he saw like 6 cop cars pull up behind us-- just to pull us over. So he looked slightly freaked out. But you only get but *so* scared of other cops, when you come from a cop family. Even if you’re Black. So he didn’t look terrified. Just uneasy. I guess. But Mom definitely didn’t like what she saw. I remember, cause I saw the tentative look in her face when she looked at me in the rearview mirror.”

He flashes back to his 6-year-old memory of seeing his Mother’s warm, pretty, but gracefully nervous eyes flash big and bright at him in the rearview mirror, inside the car.

“She told me to go back inside the trunk and not make a peep until she told me to.

“I thought it was weird that she wanted me to hide in the same place that she thought was unsafe for me to be playing in. And I thought it was weirder that she wanted to play Hide and Seek from the cops. Since-- Dad was one. But I didn’t really second guess it. I was 6. So I was just glad I got to go back to playing in the trunk.

“I went back inside the trunk and closed the back seat up behind me. But, apparently not tight enough, so Sirius-- my-- brother-- he punched the seat all the way in, kind of hard, I guess to make sure it looked like a regular backseat, so nobody would suspect that it was a trick seat, and then open it up and find me there.

“Any way-- I couldn’t really hear all that was said, and even if I did, I definitely don’t remember much. Not any more. My memory of all the preliminary talking got upstaged by what I saw through the keyhole, after I heard my Mom and brother get out of the car.

All I remember, talking-wise, is that, I guess the cops who pulled us over, claimed that we had a broken tail light, and looked like we were driving a stolen car, or something. Cause I vaguely remember hearing my brother, say something to the affect of, “It’s not stolen, and I just fixed this car up again this weekend, with my Dad-- so I know the tail light’s not broken.”

Skyler remembers the flashback of being locked in the trunk and hearing his brother’s voice in the passenger seat.

“Other than that, there really wasn’t much talking, I don’t think. At least not that I remember. I seem to only remember, maybe, like, a few other words exchanged.

“Then I heard the doors opening, on both sides of the car-- but aggressive-- like they were being yanked open from the outside. And then I heard my Mom and brother yelling and screaming, as, I guess they were dragged out. And beaten.

“I just heard the sound of punching and screaming and shouting and crying. It was torture. And then I saw them get dragged around to the back of the car, where I could see them, partially, through the keyhole in the trunk. I think that’s where they tortured them the most. And--”

He stops short, thinking through just how much he wants Shy to know of his story, just yet, “--And that’s where I watched them get shot. Dead. By dirty cops.”

He sighs to himself in angry frustration, reliving the pointlessly harrowing struggle of the trial and outcome,

“And *THEN* they got away with it. Because it was 6 well-regarded cops, with an airtight story, and no publicly known, or even considered motive-- against the word of a 6-year-old, with a fuzzy memory on certain details, and only a bird’s eye view of what actually happened.

“And then they wanted to know if I believed what I thought I saw to be a hate crime. And I was like 6. So I was confused, like-- isn’t it a hate crime no matter why they did it? Since it was hateful what they *did*?

“I was like-- why do I need to remember what specific buzz words they used-- when they were beating and torturing the hell out of my Mother and brother? I just didn’t understand what the lawyers wanted from me.

“So I just told them the truth. I didn’t remember hearing any racial slurs. But I do remember that they made my Mother and brother stop moving. For no reason. And to me, that was worse-- and more hateful-- than a racial slur.

“I think my exact words were, “Killing people, is meaner than calling them names.” The jury laughed when I said that. They seemed to like me. Like I was this adorable little nerd they felt sorry for. So we thought they were on our side.

“But then the defense made me look like, I was just this confused little pawn. And somehow made my Dad out to look like some kinda-- eccentric former Black Panther, or something-- who was just desperate to point the finger of blame, for the death of his first love and first born son, on the first faces he saw, after their grizzly murders.

“Even though there’s not a political bone in my Father’s body, and I know for a fact that he is more laid-back than a Lay-Z-Boy chair, and I *never* heard him talk about race-- until *AFTER* our family was murdered. And that was only to protect me from what he generously calls, “the bad seeds out there”, so that what happened to my big brother and Mother wouldn’t happen to me too.

“My Dad is a tough, hardworking, straightforward, good guy. I’m the secretive one, who can never let anything go. But somehow, they made him out to be this bizarrely outlandish character, that didn’t exist-- that no one who actually *knew* him could relate to-- that I knew I couldn’t recognize, even if I tried.

“And they made me out to be this poor sweet soul, who was just manipulated to say things that weren’t true-- when my Dad was the one who eventually found it in his heart to forgive, or at least move on with his life. And I’m the one who didn’t. I’m the one who’s still locked in that trunk. I’m the one they need to watch out for.

“Cause I’m the complicated mastermind they’ll never see coming. Carefully plotting their atonement. Getting all my chess board pieces in order. Until the perfect moment-- when I *pounce*.

“And I’m so clever-- I’ll even have their own children rooting for me, and cheering me on-- when I take them down. Like The Pied Piper-- I’ll get their kids to help me dethrone them-- and send them to the gallows.

That’s how bad I want this to sting. That’s how bad I want them to hurt. That’s how betrayed I want them to feel. --Before I burn their entire kingdom to the ground. --And nothing but ashes will remain.“

Shy watches Sky in skeptical trepidation, as if she’s not sure if this horror story, and animosity, is real. --Or if Sky’s just pulling her leg, to spook her for fun. Then he snaps out of his little trance of contemplation, and continues telling her the rest of his story.

“So any way-- Between the excellent mischaracterization that the cops’ defense attorneys did against me and my Dad, and the lazy-brained prosecution basically being the TRUE “morally confused pawns”, who we later found out, were secretly bought by the puppetmasters that manipulated the whole entire trial, in favor of my Mom and brother’s murderers-- we lost the case.

Every single cop got off with nothing more than a, 'Thank You For Participating In Our Sickening Farce of a Trial and Satanic Miscarriage of Justice.' And we didn't even get a lousy T-shirt."

He thinks about it, "Well-- a few days after the trial, we did find a big bag of money on our doorstep, with no name or note attached to it. I guess cause somebody felt guilty for their crime-- or for getting away with it-- and wanted to feel better about it, but didn't have the guts to come forward and publicly admit guilt.

--I have a feeling I know who did that.

"But Dad just assumed it was stolen money, that was sent to him to entrap him, or frame him, in a setup for something some bad cops did. "Payback-- for putting them through the public humiliation of a trial", he told me.

"So he took it to forensics to have it analyzed and tracked. Turns out it was clean. Or at least looked clean. Probably laundered. So Dad kept it-- but didn't use it. Not for years. Said he'd wait, and use it to send me to a private Christian school-- and an out of state college. Somewhere safe. Where he trusts the cops.

"Any way-- All the cops got relocated to other towns and cities, and the main cop, who actually did all the dirt, Pantaleo-- magically came into a lump sum of money-- and retired early. Probably a pay off to keep him from bringing any more attention to whatever secret system of operations his shady bosses have in place, that's not above board.

"I been trying to track him down, and find all of them, for years now. That's why I got into hacking. To seek justice. Ya know, I invent, to make the world a better place. Cause I love it. I game, to connect with my friends. Cause I love my crazy tribe of misfits. But I hack-- I hack-- to get retribution. Cause I love my family-- and I love making bad people pay for the harm they've done to others.

“But whenever I look for their killers, I hit a brick wall. Like someone doesn’t want me-- or anyone else who’s not in their little fraternity-- to locate any of them. Especially Pantaleo.”

He stares pensively-- with plotting eyes-- into the ground. Then he snaps out of his revenge zone, and looks over at Shyanne with a rather casual expression, “And that’s the story of what happened to my Mother and big brother.”

By now, they’ve reached the garage, and found Skyler’s motorcycle parked in the spot nearest to the security office.

Shy stares at him in open-mouthed shock, as she watches him pull his 2 motorcycle helmets out, from his backpack, “Are you-- Are you *serious?*” She’s seriously hoping he’s not.

He realizes that was all a bit heavy for a first date, so he lightens the mood, and forces a pained smile at her, as he straps on his helmet--

“Would you rather I tell you that my Mom, and big brother, are really top secret agents, for an elite, secret, underground government agency, dedicated to fighting crime and protecting the world?”

Shyanne stares at him in stunned disbelief and horrified sadness, as he slips his black and neon orange, leather motorcycle gloves onto his hands, “Yes. Yes I would. Actually.” She nods, a bit dazed by the hideous nature of his heinous tragedy.

He just smiles sadly, puts his other motorcycle helmet on her head, affectionately leans his head in, touching his motorcycle helmeted forehead against hers, and looks into her eyes-- with a warm, but melancholy gaze. “Then you’re gonna love it when I bring you to the family reunion, and they show up with purple Mardi Gras beads and pumpkin pie, that doubles as Memory Eraser, and they just do their usual thing of kicking back, and telling us all their glory stories, of high-tech, martial arts, crime-fighting espionage action, as we all sit on the edge of our seats, excited to hear every word, about how they saved us all from imminent peril, over a hundred times last year.

--Until, of course-- we eat the pumpkin pie, wake up, --and wonder where all those purple Mardi Gras beads came from.”

He playfully taps the top of her nose with his thick, gloved hand, through the top facial space in her helmet, gets on his bike, and pats the backseat, for her to join him.

Still a bit emotionally shell-shocked from his unspeakably atrocious childhood trauma, she gazes back at him in staggered malaise for a moment.

He doesn't look back at her, or rush her-- as if he knows what she's feeling, and he's waiting for her to get through it, the way he did.

--Or perhaps he's being so quiet, still, and patient, all of the sudden, like a statue, because he's trying to push the dark feelings back down again himself, so the soul-breaking memories don't rise up above him, crush him like a tsunami, consume him like a leviathan, and swallow him whole-- before the night is done.

Finally, she slowly gets on Skyler's motorcycle, sitting behind him, and wraps her arms around him. This time she looks at the Cross hanging from his key chain with more pathos, feeling the spiritually dark depth of Skyler's secret sadness-- and trauma.

He lightly taps the side of her knee with his black gloved hand, half-knowingly, to be comforting, and half-protectively, to remind her to hold on tight.

But she's already holding on tight-- and shaking nervously-- already looking forward to getting off his bike and standing on solid ground again-- as he VROOM VROOMS his bike LOUDLY-- --and they take off.

When they arrive at Skyler's house, Lissette is already waiting for them, having lost track of them at the mall, and she keeps her car hidden from them, behind a neighbor's bushy hedges.

But when she watches them tease and yuk-yuk their way into his house, flirting and laughing loudly, she just starts her car's engine, pulls out of the neighbor's driveway, runs over their trash cans angrily-- bending and breaking them into snapped pieces of black plastic-- and she zooms off down the street--

--in enraged tears.

Shyanne better watch her back.

--Cause Lissette wasn't gonna take this any more.

CHAPTER

[19]

MEET THE TRUTH ABOUT SKY AND THERESA

Inside, Skyler walks Shyanne through his equally aged and lived-in house, and she immediately feels at home, like he did at her place, as he takes her by the hand, and leads her into The Game Room-- introducing her-- to him and his friends' special Geek Night sanctuary.

It occurs to Sky that Shy is the only girl, outside of his nerdy clique, that he's ever actually shown The Game Room to. He doesn't know if that really means anything.

But it feels like it does.

Inside the game room, Sky half-sits on the pool table, with his black and orange sunglasses on his head, playing his Saxophone version of Shy's haunting melody, as Shy leans forward in a recliner, watching him-- fascinated. She pets tail-wagging Einstein, and applauds Skyler, truly impressed.

"ENCORE! ENCORE!" She giggles, "Wow, Skyler. You play really beautifully-- Somehow-- *sensual*. And --SAXXY. Heheh."

They laugh as he puts his Sax away and his dog wanders around them, looking for playtime, a rubdown, or a snack.

“Oh you like my “SAXXY” style heh? Well check this out.”

Sky turns off the mood lights. Then turns on the black light. Suddenly-- all the cool neon graffiti art on The Game Room walls POP brightly. --Especially the Cross.

Shyanne gasps, staring around at it all, in total mesmerization, “Whooooaaah... This is-- so cool...”

“Yeah. Me, Zack and Lissette use to be really into neon black light graffiti street art. Lissette got us into it as kids, then we liked it and couldn’t stop. So Dad let us--” He stops short, catching himself, “I-- I mean-- um-- back when we were-- minors-- my Dad let the 3 of us paint this room for our gaming nights.

“Lissette did the big orange heart. Zack did the big yellow smiley face. And I-- did the big white Cross. In honor of my Mom. And my brother.” He points at the 3 biggest images on the wall, “You can tell Lissette’s better at this than me and Zack are, haha.”

Shy admires his funky-cool Cross art, in awe, “It’s... beautiful...” Then she glances down at his withered, white, wooden Cross, as it hangs from his pocket, and she looks back up at the big, white Cross that’s painted on the wall, clearly seeing the correlation.

Sky smiles proudly at her, “Yeah, I’m not *all* geek.”

“You’re a geek?”

Skyler smirks at himself, “Heh, you have no idea. All my friends and I are master hackers. We can manipulate anything online. Alter documents. Even pretend to be other people. So no one can find us. We invented the meaning of geek.”

“Well you’re the coolest geek I ever met.” Shyanne shakes her head at him in awe.

“Well that’s because--”

Skyler grins knowingly at her...

“When it comes to geeky nerdism, baby I’m like Big Willie--”, he raises his eyebrows to knock his signature black and neon orange motorcycle sunglasses off the top of his forehead, and onto the ridge of his nose, half-covering his dancing eyes, “I make this look good.”

Shy can’t help but crack up at his adorably corny humor, “That was so corny--” She laughs, looking at him knowingly.

“I know--” He laughs agreeably with her, to himself, just happy that she’s laughing and enjoying herself too.

“You do make this look good, though.” She playfully tugs on the side of his sunglasses, teasing him back, as he chuckles with her, “And I like your name too-- *Sky*. ”

“I like your name too-- *Shy*.” He smiles back at her, “Rhymes with mine, like sun and shine. All we need now is some cheese and fine wine.”

“You’re a poet and your big feet show it!”

“They’re long felloooooows!” They say in laughing unison together. -
-Clearly, they come from a similar cultivation.

They laugh, as Skyler flips the regular mood lights back on, raises his sunglasses back up atop his head, and plays music from his laptop, through the speakers on the wall-- Seal’s beautiful song, Kiss From A Rose. Then Skyler picks up 2 pool sticks, and hands her one.

“No idea why my Mom named me Shy. I’m actually the exact opposite. Very confident. Though I have been told I’m quite sweet and romantic, like my last name-- Valentine.”

He chuckles as she tries to figure out how to hold her pool stick.

He mimics her playfully, “No idea why my Mom named me Sky. I’m actually the exact opposite. Very deep, like the ocean. Though I have been told I’m quite strong and reliable, like my last name. Stone.”

He goes over, behind her, and shows her how to hold her pool stick correctly, toward balls on the billiards table.

“Haha-- we have a lot in common.”

“You mean, besides dead friends, murder mysteries, and lost parents taken from us in our youth? Nice.”

She hits a few balls. One goes in a hole. He kisses her cheek softly, making her blush and smile, as he goes around the table, preparing his stick to hit the ball, on his turn. She rolls her eyes, charmed.

“Oh don’t be so grim, you saxxy player you. We have lots of good, *positive* things in common: Music. TV. Creativity. Faith. Philosophy. Intellect. Values. Nature. Humor. Height. Culture. Class--”

Sky smiles coolly to himself, as she humorously rattles on, and he hits a bunch of balls into the holes, “You been thinkin alot about us Miss Shy. I take it you trust me now?”

Shy eyes him, mildly confused, “Trust you? What made you think I didn’t?”

Sky helps Shy hold her stick properly again, touching her, close, “Cause I read in Theresa’s file how you don’t trust people any more. Now that you’ve seen the darkness in them. They’re shallow. Afraid of truth. So you only trust people who are deep. Smart. And love the truth. Like you. That’s why you like murder mysteries. Cause you love the pay off.

“Exposing truth. Shining light on darkness. But you don’t tell people you distrust them. You just hold ‘em back and let ‘em THINK you trust them. Cause your nature’s trusting. And people act better that way. But I see questions in your eyes. --You tryin’ to supernaturally read me, Shy?”

She hits a few balls, but none of them go into any of the holes. He lightly pecks her bare shoulder, and returns to the opposite side of the table, to take his turn.

“I trust you. I’m here, aren’t I?”

She giggles playfully, “But I can’t control my gifts. Visions just sorta, *happen* to me. I receive info randomly. I don’t, like, drive the conversation, like, call up the angels and say, “Hey what up homies? I’m goin’ to the store! Which place has the best sale?” Doesn’t work that way. Not for me. I’m a passive prophet. Sporadic.

“I can be exhausted with a constant flood of info for a whole year straight. Then go a whole year with no prophet info whatsoever. I wish I could control it. But I don’t know how. I’m more like a beeper than a cell phone. Guess that kinda makes me outdated, huh?

Sky shoots with his pool stick. More of his balls go into the holes.

“You’re never outdated, but always classic. Authentic beauty, never plastic. Timeless treasure, full of magic. Priceless value, worth braving tragic. I can tell you honestly-- with everything that’s true. There is no beginning and no end-- to my gratefulness for you.”

Sky goes over to help Shy with her pool stick. But she just gazes at him, delighted.

“Did you make that up?”

He nods, trying to get her in position, but she remains.

“Just now? --For *me*?”

“I wrote a poetic love letter to my soulmate years ago. But I never gave it to her. Cause--” He shrugs, “I hadn’t met her yet. So I saved it. To give her on our wedding day. You’re the only one, I ever told any part of it to.”

He looks at her softly, with a cool, pleasant smile. He nudges her into position. She prepares to shoot more pool. But then she surprises him, with a quick kiss on the cheek. He slowly turns to look at her, with a gradual smile sprouting on his blushing face.

She blushes harder, and quickly turns to shoot her pool stick again. She hits a ball into a hole, as he gazes at her. Then he gently whisks the curls away from her shoulder, and he plants another soft peck on her neck, making her shiver.

--Then he plants another one.

--And another.

He's about to forfeit the game just to kiss her--

--*A LOT*.

She gasps at the heated, velvety sensation of him, and grips the pool table tight, trying to keep her composure.

"It's beautiful." She quivers, tittering nervously, as she feels his warm lips and hot breath flutter across her cool neck. But then she inquires further... "Your poem. Did you-- ever read or write any poetry for-- Theresa?"

Suddenly, Sky stops-- stands up straight, and sharpens his pool stick, with the small, chalky, blue square buffer, from the clear tray of grinders on the wall, no longer in the necking mood.

"I wrote Theresa a poem. A poetic acronym love letter of her name, that I created and painted, with black light colors, on canvas, in art class. I worked hard on it, all day long. Then I-- snuck it into her locker, with the key copy she gave me, when I got locked out of my own locker. Didn't hear from her all day. Which was typical. Then I found her working with her Core 4 crew, out in the courtyard.

"So I went over and I-- asked her-- "Hey, Theresa. Did you get my painting?" And she was like, "Oh yeah, hun, it's nice, thanks" and she just went back to talking with her crew like I wasn't even there. Like my love gift was just another piece of junk messin' up her locker.

Shyanne is humorously horrified, "Aw. No wonder you felt worthless."

He makes a casual "Yep" look, and shoots pool again. None of the balls make it into any holes this time. Then he stands straight up and just gazes blankly at the pool table top, as Seal's song ends and changes to the 6 minute extended remix of Prince's "Eye Hate U". Shy watches him carefully.

“The day we broke up, she told me the same thing I heard her dad tell her Stepmom, the day we first started dating.”

Shyanne eyes him with curious focus, “That she has no respect for inventors? No love for creators? Which--” She smirks rather bitterly, “is basically the same thing my ex told me. --Indirectly. --And passive-aggressively. *As usual.*”

Sky huffs slightly at her words, in mutual disgust for their exes, as he shakes his head with her, feeling similar contempt-- and he shrugs a bit. “Yeah, basically. Only she put it another way. She said-- ‘Just like Believers, who religiously believe in God-- artists and architects, are nothing more than whiny children, who foolishly believe in the pointless land of make-believe, in order to avoid having to deal with reality.

“And that she didn’t have any patience for that. Because she wanted to be half of a successful power couple. And being paired up with a constant dreamer, whose future career plans were not as financially secure as hers were-- and who was always sad about the way she treated him behind closed doors, was a drag-- and she didn’t have time for it. So I had become nothing but an impractical obstacle in her life.’

“Which-- well-- those were almost the exact same words I overheard her robotic dad snapping at her shocked Stepmom... when I walked Theresa home from the movies, one night. It was our first date. So I can’t say God didn’t warn me. That was one of God’s little warning signs right there. We just ignore those signs, to do what we want. But I guess I shoulda listened, and taken it as an omen to run away. Fast.”

--Wow.” Shyanne gazes back at him with relaxed understanding and a sympathetic sense of comfort now, “I feel your pain. I mean, I really do. Cause that’s-- like-- the exact same thing I went through. So I guess you feel me too. Which is refreshing. Most people don’t understand why I’m still so mad about it all. Sometimes I don’t either.

“But when someone so-- *casually*-- crushes your identity, beliefs, and God-given purpose in life, and shrinks your value down to the size of a dirt particle-- or worse--

“They belittle you and your contributions in life down to nothing but a handicap on theirs-- especially while you’re at your weakest and most vulnerable, and you’re still wounded or recovering from a depression over something...

“--which is basically like kicking you when you’re down-- and after you gave so much of yourself to them emotionally-- and they emotionally gave you NOTHING back-- it leaves you feeling... lost.

“Damaged. Spiritually crippled. And unable to explain it.” Then she thinks about it, “Wow. We experienced basically the same exact situation. Only difference is, my ex is still breathing, and yours is--”

“Dead.” Skyler finishes her sentence without lifting his eyes away from the billiards table that he now stares at.

Shy stares at him with a bit of sudden concern in her now slightly widened eyes, “You-- You don’t think-- whoever-- killed Theresa-- was-- trying to get revenge on her for-- anything. --Do you?”

Sky shrugs, still staring down in deep thought. “Does it matter? Either way, she’s dead.”

Shy gulps slightly, a bit discomfited by his cavalierly cold tone. She tries to hide it, but suddenly she wonders...

Could Skyler Stone be The Valentine Killer?

But she shakes her head, putting herself in his shoes.

How would she sound if she answered the same questions?

Probably the same way Skyler does now.

So she clears her throat, with a curt nod, and presses on, “How did you-- meet-- Theresa? Or, I guess I mean, well, how did you-- why did you-- err, what,” She sighs at herself.

“--What made you want to go out with her-- in the 1st place?”

Sky sighs in grim thought, as he goes over to Shy and helps her with her stick again. She shoots pool again, and hits a few balls in some holes.

“I met Theresa, like, *seriously* met, as in *started really talking to her* --when I saw her crying by herself, in the halls, like-- 5 years ago. When I was late for history class. Lil did I know it was not only the most emotion or connection I’d get from her after that, but the only. I shoulda realized. I’d seen her around for years. But the only time I actually got a moment with her, --like-- a *real* moment, --was-- by accident. Coincidence.

“She was alone, hiding from the world. She never meant for anyone to find her. I was the foreign factor. Not her business-as-usual self thereafter. But I fooled myself into thinking that she opened up to me. -- It was really just that she was-- licking her wounds, and I just happened to be there, during her secret self-recovery process. Cause the bathroom was too crowded for her.”

“Wow. That’s sad. What was she crying about? Her Dad?”

“Close. Ironically. An emotionally frozen scumbag twice her age took her 14 year old virginity, and then iced her. He was basically the pedophile predator fake boyfriend version of her Dad. Type of person who’s dead inside. But doesn’t tell you. And instead makes you feel like you’re the reason why. Like you’re just unlovable. And too unhappy about it.

“You should be happy with lip service when actions say the exact opposite. Right? When someone locks you in a freezer and then tells you they love you-- you should just be glad they said they love you and say it back. Because just like The PC Police-- *empty words* and *pretending* nothing is *wrong*-- is more important than-- *meaningful actions*-- and *doing the real work* to make things *right*. --Right?

“And it’s just more hurt people hurting people, isn’t it? Broken people breaking the unbroken, so they’ll then, in turn, break the unbroken spirits after them. Paying the curse forward, like a never-ending system of monstrously martyring brokenness. It’s just another vicious cycle.

“Everything’s just another dark, twisted, vicious cycle-- that victimizes the heroes, villainizes the victims, and then hero-fies the villains. But are the martyrs really loved by monsters, though? --I wonder...”

Shyanne gulps uncomfortably at Skyler’s disturbed tone, as she watches him watch the 8 ball as if it’s speaking to him. Concerned, she senses that she’s hit a nerve, but she’s not sure why. Then he glances at her abruptly, startling her.

“What about you? Why’d you go out with your ex?” He smiles unexpectedly, with mischievous knowingness, “Lemme guess-- he was a super hot member of a boy band?”

“I wish.” Shy smirks whimsically, shaking her head, “No-- I dunno...” She shrugs, “Boredom? Guess I was just tired of not knowing what being in a real romantic relationship felt like. But the irony is, that after dating him, I still don’t know what being in a real romantic relationship feels like. Cause our relationship was neither real, nor romantic, nor a relationship. Since I was the only one who ever tried to emotionally or spiritually relate. I was open like a life-giving waterfall. He was closed like a life-crushing tomb.”

“Wow. Why’d you pick him to be your first boyfriend?”

“He had good references.” She laughs at herself, and at Sky’s confused expression, then explains, “I met him through a friend named Denorah, who then later turned out not to be my friend-- or a very good person. Much like my ex. So the whole thing just turned into a hellish nuclear bomb that blew up in my face...”

“My life woulda been better had I just remained a glossy-eyed prisoner of my own impatient boredom. But hindsight is 20/20 I guess, so... yeah...”

“Word.” Sky nods in agreement, then takes his shot with his stick, and hits all the remaining balls into the holes.

She gazes at him, impressed, “You win. Congrats.”

“Thanks.” He appreciates the positive mood switch, to quell the rehashed animosity that was bubbling up inside him.

“I have something to help you with your writing. It’s lightyears better than what you use now. I stripped out the glitches, to make it function faster without pregnant pauses, and set it up so speech control audio playback actually PLAYS BACK all the dual dialogue.

Also comes with built-in thesaurus and grammar check. And, it’s not just intuitive in the creative process-- but it’s full service, in the post-production and publishing process too. I made it so it analyzes elements of your work-- both automatically, and by manual input--

“And then it connects you to a list of all the agents, publishers and producers publicly listed online, who’d be most interested in your work, based on an algorithm I made. I started working on it like 3 or 4 years ago as a paid project, for a rich guy I met on Craigslist, who-- got cut off from his trust fund by his Dad.

“So he decided to magically just-- become a writing sensation overnight. Even though he never wrote anything in his life. But he wanted to take the product without paying for it first, and I didn’t have a copyright yet cause I didn’t have any real money, and fam doesn’t take my tech seriously yet, so I was like, “DUDE. Do I look stupid?”

“I mean, I may be young, but I’m not retarded. Plus I could tell the guy had no character, talkin’ bout, “strip clubs” this, and, “gotta get girls drunk to pass out” that. Probably why his Dad cut him off.

So I was like, “You pay me first-- Then I give you the product second. A copy of it, cause I own the patent.”

“Well I pretended to, cause I didn’t wanna get ripped off. He never paid me. So I never gave it to him. But after I read your work last night, I decided to dig it out and update it. It’s gonna rock your world. Wanna see it?”

He smiles bashfully at her, self-consciously caught in his truest, rawest, most honest, tech-artist-inventor mode of self. Sensing this--
She grins excitedly.

CHAPTER

[20]

MEET THE MYSTERIOUS MR. SKYLER

Einstein follows Sky and Shy into his spotlessly clean, tidy bedroom-- with its neat desk, made-up bed, and nothing on the floor. --Not a single object is out of place.

“Wow. Your room is really *neat*. And-- Smells like-- *lavender*?” Shy is genuinely impressed by his immaculate room, and wonders to herself how she could EVER possibly get HER cluttered, over-stuffed bedroom this spectacularly perfect.

Then Einstein nuzzles his snout into the palm of her hand, pawing for her to pet and play with him-- so she does.

“Haha, aw, I love Einstein! He’s so sweet!” Shy plays with Sky’s happy dog who licks her hands, all friendly.

“Yeah. He’s a pushover. Not much of a watch dog. Feed him a tasty chew stick and he’ll roll right over for you--” Sky sits at his computer desk, and throws Einstein a chew stick with a smirk.

Einstein instantly grabs it, and rolls over, for him to rub his belly, adorably.

“Haha-- nah, we love Einstein. He’s a good dog. Always finds my missing shoes.” He chuckles, rubbing Einstein’s belly, and tosses his bag of doggy chew sticks onto the shelf by his bed, as his wilted, white, wooden Cross dangles from his pocket, brushing against the side of his chair.

“Aww, he’s so adorable. I wanna give him a chew stick haha. -- What made you name him Einstein?” She bends over and pets Einstein’s belly, as Einstein chews on his snack stick.

“Oh haha-- He finds creative ways of getting our food at dinner, with no knowledge of what it is. So I’m fairly convinced that, like me and Albert, he too believes that-- “imagination is more important than knowledge”.

Shy laughs as Sky smiles laughingly, sits down, and plays the pretty relaxing ocean sounds of “Nature’s Pulse” by Sleep: Reflections of Nature, on his iTunes, via all the speakers wired perfectly all over his room.

He pulls up a program on his Mac, as the music relaxes her, and she admires his sweet family photos, in the Cross-shaped frame on his desk. She smiles warmly at it.

Then she sees a thin glass vase that sits on a beat up old Bible, beside a black WWJD bracelet, on the night-stand by his bed. In it, is a pink sparkly rose. She picks up the rose and bracelet, and the vase instantly lights up at her, as she oohs over it. She jolts back, startled, and he laughs.

“I set it to be sensitive to sound frequencies. So if you put it next to music, it’ll flash to the beat of the bass and volume.”

“Oh wow-- So cool-- You can do that? --Ah! I see you found your WWJD bracelet again haha.”

She tosses the bracelet to him. He catches it and puts it on, strapping it loosely around his wrist.

“Yeah, heheh-- Finally dug it back out of the laundry. Was a gift from my Mom. *I kinda lost it after she died...* She was the one who always made sure I found it. And washed it.

“Dad took us to church, and led us in the family prayer over dinner each night-- before Mom and Sirius-- well-- ya know-- and then his schedule got all crazy-- so...” His voice kind of trails off in distant thought.

“That’s when he had me start learning mixed martial arts with my mentor. To keep me busy while he was at work, and to strengthen my self-defense, if-- anything bad, like what happened to my Mom and my brother, ever happened again.

He smirks cynically, “Not that champion level blackbelt skills can magically stop a bullet, but-- it’s better than nothing, I guess, haha,” His mind starts to drift away again... Then he snaps back to the present.

“Any way, Dad’s a traditionalist when it comes to our protestant faith, but-- he was never really one for nuance. He’s more of a tour bus traditionalist. More casual and simple than I think my Mom was...”

--Aw. Well your WWJD bracelet is a cool, sweet gift Momma Stone left you to remember her by. I bet it’ll come in handy, and unexpectedly, one day-- if it hasn’t already.

Sky chuckle-smiles sadly, “Yeah... Maybe...”

She smiles. Then she notices his wall shelves, full of mechanical and technological science project awards, and certificates of achievement, and she smiles, knowingly.

“Aw. You got a shelf for all your award certificates and trophies too. Coolioso. Glad to know I’m not the only one.”

She giggles, admiring a photo of 10-year-old Skyler, holding up a giant trophy at a science fair, as his Dad pats his back, smiling at the camera, as if proud of his son, but still a little, or a lot, out of his old-school-jock element.

“Oh--” Sky laughs dismissively, “That? --Kid stuff. Now I want more than awards for my work. --Now I wanna get *paid*.”

Shy laughs, nodding, “I know exactly how you feel.”

“What’s your wall of unknown fame and achievement for? You a secret science geek too, Miss Valentine?”

She laughs, shaking her head, “Oh no no. I’m an artist. The old-school creator. My wall is full of conventional art recognition. For writing, singing, sketching, designing, editing. Mostly writing and singing though. But-- all standard artistic stuff.”

“Nice.” He nods, smiling, relieved that he doesn’t have to walk on eggshells with her, like he does with others...

Then Shy sees his book shelf, tilts her head curiously at one of his books, and pulls it out, with a puzzled, laughing face, “Oh How He Loved Me”? --Isn’t this-- a best selling-- *women’s* book? You--” She represses laughter, “You read *romance* novels?” She flips through it, and stops at a bookmarked passage that she finds. Suddenly her face grows more solemn, in realization, as she reads aloud.

“He intertwined his fingers with hers, lifted her hand up, and pressed it against the wall in front of her. Then he gently held her bare waist, softly caressing her stomach, beneath her blouse, as he kissed her shoulder inward, until his soft, warm lips, reached the nape of her neck-- and she melted in his arms.”

She looks up from it in slightly thunderstruck disbelief, “You didn’t come up with that on your own. You got that from this book. These romance novels are your instruction manual on how to get women to submit to you.”

He chortles to himself, completely unashamed, “Well, yeah. Sure. Why not? I mean-- how else am I supposed to learn how to romance a girl? Watch *PORN*, like all the other dumbasses do? Yeah, I see how well that works out for them in the long-run. He smirks, shaking his head.

She furrows her brow, in realization, “Oh, NO. Obviously not. That’s-- not romance. Or beautiful. Or even sexy.” She mumbles in thought, “Just lewd, sick and twisted.”

“Right.” He rises up from his seat, steps over to her, grabs the romance novel from her, and flips the pages, to find another passage, as she just watches him search for it.

“I don’t watch porn to learn how to touch and talk to women, because I learned about myself, a long time ago, that I don’t want a porn star for a girlfriend.

“Or any other weak-minded, perverted, empty vessel, with low self-esteem, and a lost soul cemented in brokenness, who’s just gonna cheat on me with all of my closest friends and family, be a bad Mother to our future kids-- and then tell me 30 years from now, in our painfully messy, expensive, divorce proceedings, that none of the kids that we raised together-- are even biologically mine.

“To avoid that kind of heartbreak, humiliation, and overall demoralization about the state of humanity-- I decided to be a little more clever about it, find out what smart, nice girls are reading, and try my best to be like that. I mean, it’s not creepy erotica.

“It’s just an incredibly detailed guide on how to romance a woman and make her feel loved. And beautiful. And sexy. Which, I’m assuming, is what women really want, in order to be truly happy and satisfied by their men. Or at least that’s the common theme and pattern I’m picking up, from all of these books. Am I right?”

She eyes him with new fascination, “Yea-- Yeah.” Her voice is soft, barely there, as she clears her throat, like she forgot how to speak, because she’s so caught off guard and impressed by him.

“That’s-- *exactly* what women want. I mean, assuming most women are like me.” She rethinks, “Well, then again, most women are actually NOT like me. Most women are much more easily seduced than me. Or at least more numb to the spiritual nature of sex-- than me.”

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

“Observation.”

She thinks-- and sighs, realizing, “My psyche evall is in Theresa’s file, with all of my taste preferences and personality deets, isn’t it?”

He smiles honestly at her, “Yeah basically.” He chuckles.

She shakes her head at him as he finds the passage he was looking for and shows it to her, before he goes back to his chair and takes a seat. She eyes him before she looks at the highlighted text.

“You’re a dangerous young man, Skyler Stone. Creatively finding all these back alley ways, to seduce and manipulate your prey, to fall into your webbed net, like an unknowing school of fish. I mean, like, *I* don’t even read romance novels, haha.”

Sky chuckles, good-natured, “Well you don’t *HAVE* to read women’s romance novels to know what women want. Cause *you’re* a woman. *You’re* a girl. You *know* what *you* want. *I*, on the other hand, would have *no idea* what you want-- if it weren’t for all these books.

“Being that I live in a house with absolutely *NO* women to tell me anything. My friends’ Moms and sisters stay busy. Lissette doesn’t even have a Mom. Just a Dad and 4 brothers. And the few girls I’ve ever kissed weren’t exactly “*Great Teachers*” on the subject.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong. My Dad taught me how to *TALK* to girls. How to “bait and catch” a woman. But no one taught me how to, like, *caress*-- a woman. How to-- physically and emotionally-- *CONNECT*, with a girl. That’s what those books are for. To tell me what women want. So I know how to connect with the one *I* want.”

He shrugs as the music changes to the peaceful, serene, oceanic sounds of “Asleep In The Sun” by Sleep: Reflections of Nature, that appear to be relaxing Shyanne more and more.

Shyanne reads his neon yellow underlined passage out loud, “Drama and chaos exploded all around them, like a minefield set to go off beneath their feet at any second. But amidst all the distracting grenades of insanity blowing up at every turn, they both knew they had a connection with each other that only they knew.

“--*Exclusively*.

“She felt it.

“He felt it.

“They both recognized the profound reality, that no matter what war zone they were in, when they were near each other, all they could see was each other. All they could hear was each other. All they could want was each other. And they would die a million deaths for each other. Not merely out of love and sacrifice-- but out of faith and knowledge-- that they would see each other again-- in the next lifetime. Because their souls shared-- an unbreakable connection.”

She looks up at him, enamored, “That’s-- beautiful. And you highlighted it. --Why?”

He just smiles at her, “Well, I’ve always wanted that, deep down, and--” He looks down, not sure if he should be sharing this with her.

Will she think he’s not for real-- and not believe him-- the way romantics break, after they’ve been burned by liars?

Or--

What if she thinks it’s corny crap, and she just dismisses him, like she thinks he’s just a foolish child--

--The way Theresa did.

But she let him in, when he read her file. She let him in, when she believed his college lies. She let him in, when she trusted him enough to take her on a motorcycle ride and then to his house. The least he could do now, he figured--

--was let her in.

"That's the way I felt the first moment I saw you. I never felt that before you, with anyone else. And that's the way you look at me. And act with me... too. And--"

He thinks, deliberating how far he should go in fair-mindedly *letting her in*, "And-- I've seen a lot of pretty girls. But there's something different about you. And the way you make me feel. That's why I showed that to you. Cause something comes alive deep inside me, every time I see your beautiful face."

She stares at him in paralyzed wonder. He gulps to himself with a nervous chuckle, realizing that she's staring at him, and he braces for the worst. His thoughts run amuck in a rather short amount of micro-seconds. Thoughts like:

She probably thinks he's a mushy sap now.

Or worse--

A lying con artist "player" who's just "playing" her.

"What?" He watches her eyes carefully for her reaction.

She knows it. She senses that. But she's too consumed in admiration, to care about his boyishly paranoid, emotional-intimacy-challenged anxiety, as she eyes him with new fascination.

"No, it's just-- Every time I think I see what you're all about-- you pull out one more layer of unexpected intrigue. It's like drifting through a dynamic dream of endless, captivating dimension. You-- You are uniquely fascinating to me, Skyler Stone."

Relieved by her girly awe, Sky relaxes, with a charming smile, and gazes back at her wantingly, "Likewise, Shyanne Valentine. -- Likewise."

They smile at each other. Then she looks suspicious.

“You knew I’d be up here tonight...”

Uh oh.

Here comes the “player” charge.

Skyler fakes funny innocence with her, to relax her with humor, “What? Can’t a man have romance novels and pretty pink roses, that sparkle in the moonlight and dance to the beautiful echoes of God’s grand nature scapes, without being judged or suspected of self-serving naughtiness?”

“You Romance-Novel-Bigoted Sparkly-Pink-Rose-A-Phobe-- If you don’t like men with love stories and sparkly pink roses by their beds-- social media, cable news, and comedy TV commanded me, to call you, a dumb evil racist bigot-- with a phobia.”

Shy stares at Sky’s laughing face. They both bust out laughing. She nods, knowingly-- and gratefully validated.

“Clever. Well we’re on the same page politically. And I know this rose is for me, so I thank you for my gift. But I think I’ll be savvy, and take it back to the billiards room, so that we will behave, good sir-- of whom I shan’t judge-- with my-- bigoted, dumb, self-racist, media-manufactured “rose-a-phobia”.

She moseys toward the door. He shrugs, coolly gazing back at his Mac, with his back turned to her.

“OK. But ya won’t get to see the magical creation that will ease all your troubled stress-- and make all your wildest dreams come true.”

She doesn’t stop, “That’s OK.” Her voice lilts knowingly as she puts her hand on the doorknob.

“OK how ‘bout this-- I’ll make you a deal.” He says.

She turns the door knob any way.

“You put on the sternest, firmest, most serious face--” He continues, “--and if I can get you to laugh within 60 seconds-- you have to stay and let me show you my program.”

She stops. And thinks.

It's an interesting proposition she never heard before.

She turns to him, "And what do I get if I don't laugh?"

"A million dollars."

She rolls her eyes, "You don't have a million dollars."

"I will 1 day. Til then-- I owe you a million dollars."

She gives him a funny look.

"And a slushee."

She giggles.

"Ahp! Laughing!" He points at her with a laughing smile.

"That doesn't count!" She defends her chuckle seriously.

"OK, how bout this-- if you don't laugh-- I'll give you whatever you want, that I can get for you right now. But-- if I make you laugh-- you have to stay. --Deal?"

She gives him a funny look.

He sighs knowingly, "OK-- Whadaya want?"

She lights up, grinning bright, "Front row seats to TP and Christi Luv's concert next month, and Midnight Premiere tickets to the next Angel Wars movie."

"Done." He nods confidently, "So we have a deal?"

She sighs, thinking, folds her arms, looking away thoughtfully, and nods with a confident resolve, "OK. But I'm not gonna laugh. I'll just think of something really super sad that makes me cry through whatever joke you throw at me."

"OK. But it's not a joke." He plays Derek Minor's song, "Right By My Side", featuring Anthony Evans and Chad Jones.

"What?" She furrows her brow, confused now.

"It's a song that speaks from my heart."

He gets up, lowers his black and orange sunglasses over his eyes, shoves some goofy fake gold grills into his mouth, gets up, turns around, and starts lip syncing the song, as soon as the lyrics drop, flailing his arms and neck over-demonstratively, like a silly rapper-wannabe, pretending to be a hard-core gangster, in between putting his hand on his heart, as he mouths the sweet words of the romantic hip-hop song to her, doing funny-cool dance moves, moving his lips silently, in synchronization, with the upbeat love rap jam.

Sufficed to say--

It doesn't take long before she busts out laughing--

--*HARD*.

But he doesn't stop. He just keeps lip syncing and dancing charmingly, and then, finally, he grabs her hand, lacing his hand around her back, and he dances with her, swaying her side to side, twirling her around, and leaning her back, as she continues to crack up laughing.

Then she joins him in dancing goofy and silly, and he can't help but laugh with her, as she lifts his sunglasses back up onto his head, to see his eyes. He smiles at her warmly, hugs her close to him, and kisses her cheek sweetly-- both of them dancing and laughing together, playfully.

Clearly--

--*He won*.

And he grins victoriously.

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ACT II: PART 3 - THE SECRET BAND

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CHAPTER

[21]

MEET MR. CALLAHAN

Detective Sirius Stone leans back in his squeaky, gray, wheeled office chair, studying a myriad of case files, spread out all over his gray wood office desk-- including images of deceased Jaleel Jackson Jr. and his blonde fiance, Brook Bradley, with her contact information. Jaleel wears a shirt with a Cross on it, that reads: “#SAVED” on it.

Outside the closed door of his simple, boring office, the police station is abuzz with action. He blocks out the muted noise, as a stumped-looking man, in his 20s, stands in front of his desk, playing garbled sounds back to him, on a laptop speaker. It sounds like muffled talking-- and then a SPLASH.

“Sorry, sir. That’s as clear as we can get it, so far.”

Stone nods at him, troubled by this. A desk clerk knocks on the door, opening it meekly.

“Uh, sir, sorry to bother you, but there’s a homeless guy here. Says you gave him your card at the Benedict George crime scene, and told him to contact you, if he remembers anything on The Valentine Kill?”

Stone looks unmoved for a moment. Then he jolts, remembering the man, and nods at the clerk.

“Tell him I’ll be in to see him in a moment.”

The blinds over the window whish and clack against the interrogation room door, as Detective Stone pushes it open and sees the homeless man sitting at the cold, steel, table that's nailed down to the gritty, gray cement ground.

He sits across from the dirty, jittery man, and notices a green Cross tattoo on his arm. Leery of his instability, Stone hands him a bottled water and nods slowly at him. The homeless man ignores his wordless, jock greeting, grabs the water, smashes it open, and gulps the liquid down, like a desperate lost straggler, trapped in a hopeless desert for years on end. Detective Stone takes control of the room.

"Hello... Mr... Callahan? How are you?"

"They're watching us." Mr. Callahan gapes at him with bug eyes, "Higher beings. In the sky. They're everywhere."

Detective Stone throws an exhausted, annoyed, knowing look at various members from his investigation unit, who watch the 2 of them from behind the 2-way mirror. They shake their heads to themselves, in tired agreement with him.

"Mr. Callahan. You-- have info?"

"Promise you'll pay me back?" He nods fervently, "I know it's not mine, but not yours either. I need the money more than you. To protect myself. From the bad ones. Everywhere."

He sighs, exasperated, "Mr. Callahan. I'm really sorry for your plight, but I really do have cases to solve. I'll have my desk clerk order you some food and give you information on the nearest homeless shelter you can go to--"

BAM!

Callahan abruptly slams his hand down hard on the table, making everyone jump and instantly go for their guns. Stone eyes Callahan's hand, which shakes like he has Parkinson's. Slowly, Callahan removes his quivering hand, to reveal a thick, shiny, gold ring, with the chiseled word, "GOD" on it, in Gothic letters.

Detective Stone looks at jittery Callahan.

“They-- they dropped it. When they were-- dumping the rich guy into the dumpster. They-- saw police lights and-- ran off. But the ring-- got caught on the rich guy’s belt when they dumped him in. And it fell out. I-- saw the ring. Cause I was sleeping in the trash. They didn’t notice me.

“Cause no one-- no one ever notices-- the homeless. So I took it. And I ran. Then I went back later to scrap for food. And, I saw all you guys, and you asked me so many questions. I-- I couldn’t-- Well-- You gave me your card. And I saw in my conspiracy paper how those 4 school kids looked like they got killed by that same killer.

“So I-- I just-- well, I-- I don’t care much for rich guys. But kids dying is something that bothers me. So-- you can have the ring. But-- I’ll take the food. Thanks. And any secret being protection you have for the bad ones.”

Awed Stone grabs a pen from his pocket, and carefully picks the ring up with it. Everyone behind the mirror leans forward in awed, new concern.

“First I thought I was dreaming. That the grim reaper was coming for me.”

“--Oh?” Stone admires the ring, then looks back at Callahan, “Why’s that?”

“Cause they wore old white robes. Like in old times.”

“How many of them were there?”

“Just one person.”

“Male or female?”

“I dunno. They wore a hood.”

“Black, white? Tall, short? Fat, skinny? Young, old?”

“I-- couldn’t tell. Black? Maybe? I dunno, it was dark.”

“Anything else?”

“Uh-- I-- I dunno.”

“Did you wear this or wipe it off?”

“I put it on, but I didn’t-- clean it.”

“You did really well, Mr. Callahan. This is excellent help. Thank you. Let me know if you recall any more.”

Stone puts his hand out to the man. Callahan jerks back, nervous, as if not knowing why his hand is there. He looks at Stone. Stone nods at him, keeping his hand out to him. Realizing why, as if just remembering what normal, healthy, life-inside-a-home society use to be like, back when he was a part of it, Mr. Callahan takes his hand, and they shake. Stone gruffs a solemn, friendly nod at the man, then nods at the window for them to come to the door. The analyst opens the door. Stone hands him the pen with the ring around it.

“We just got a break in the case. Do a DNA analysis and tell me soon as you find anything. Thanks to our homeless friend Mr. Callahan’s new info, I’m bringing my work home... with me tonight for reexamination.” He grins in relieved amazement at the excited analyst.

“Oh and Mr. Detective, sir-- they-- played music. During the ceremony.”

Detective Stone turns around and looks back at Mr. Callahan curiously, “Ceremony?”

“Well, I dunno. It kinda seemed like a ceremony. The Valentine Killer person lit a big black candle and played weird choir music from a walkman or somethin’. I can’t remember the melody. But the words. They were so-- scary. Nothing I ever heard in any church before.”

Detective Stone pulls out another pen and pad from his pocket, and starts writing, “What were the words?”

“We are the gods of the universe. They will bow at our feet. We are the gods of the universe. They are the weakest of weak. We are the gods of the universe. The masters that they serve and need. We are the gods of the universe. They are our dinner-- to eat”. --Real creepy.”

He shivers.

Detective Stone stops writing, "Did you say-- to *eat*?"

Callahan nods, timidly. Stone throws a worried look at his people, behind the window, who look grossed out. Then he looks back at the man, and nods.

"Thank you, Mr. Callahan. A week's worth of the best food for you-- on me."

Mr. Callahan grins big at him, "Thanks!" He looks ecstatic, "Oh! And what about the secret beings?"

Detective Stone sighs.

CHAPTER

[22]

MEET THE SUSPECTS

Back in Sky's bedroom, Shy sits at his desktop, by Sky's Cross-shaped photo, and admires his program, as Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" plays softly. They've both kicked off their shoes and socks, but his sunglasses are still atop his head.

Skyler rises from his seat, grabs a soft, rubbery, clear ball, that lights up at his touch, in an exuberant spectacle of lights, and tosses it back and forth, from left to right, as he plops down on his bed. Einstein nuzzles him for the ball. So Sky grabs a rawhide from the shelf, and throws it to his dog to keep him busy gnashing, as he plays with the ball.

"Wow. This program you've created is really awesome, Skyler. You are DEFINITELY a certified genius. Gonna be rich some day too-- If you don't get ripped off first."

He chuckles darkly, "Yeah. Or murdered by The Valentine Killer. Maybe we should all just-- leave the country." He eyes her intensely, "Shy-- If I asked you to run away with me right now-- would you?"

She scoffs, glancing over at him, "I dunno how your Dad would feel about you running off, but my Mom would fall apart at the seams. We're all we've got." She shrugs matter-of-factly. "And besides-- I'm pretty sure neither of us is a martyr loved by monsters, Sky. --Err --I hope." She ponders it with a more serious expression.

"Yeah, but-- what if we're connected to any of those psycho cults and don't even know it? I dunno the secret lives of everyone I know. I mean, I'd like to. But there's only but so much you can learn from electronic data."

Shy rises out of her seat now, noticing Sky, as he plays with his lit up ball. She saunters over, grabs it, and plays with it, tossing the ball back and forth to herself, as she admires its lit-up nature. He postures his hands to catch it. She tosses it. He catches it, and they play catch for a bit.

"Let's see." She thinks aloud, "The Valentine Killer is a very seductive and calculated chameleon, who knows how to talk people into trusting him-- and has a sensitive feminine side. Or split personality-- and is good at profiling people, making them see and believe whatever he wants them to.

"So The Valentine Killer is someone who is very intelligent and insightful. Maybe even innocent-seeming and endearing. Like somebody you'd automatically trust, like, and never suspect of hurting someone. He's persuasive and secretly charming. Somebody you'd think of as your hero, maybe. Even though-- deep down-- he knows he's a monster."

She snaps out of her thought, "I dunno. If anyone you knew was The Valentine Killer, who would it be?"

Sky shrugs, "Well obviously none of my friends, cause they were with me at the exact time of The Core 4's deaths."

"But who *wasn't* with you that night?"

“Well... --*you*. ”

She thrusts the ball at him, offended, “Besides *ME*. ”

Sky laughs, catching the ball hard, “OK OK. The 3 cults-- obviously. Principal Bellmont. Mr. Skitz. Theresa’s parents. Laura. That new kid Chase. All the cop kids. My Dad. Agent Diaz. I dunno. Ton a people.” He throws the ball back at her.

“Yeah, but who had motive to kill The Core 4?” She catches the ball and throws it back.

“Anybody they were investigating.” He catches the ball, “Which, apparently, was a lot of bad people.” He throws it, and she catches it, “Who all had motive. God, see, I’m really not a detective. My Dad is. I’m just a tech creator and network manipulator. That’s how I figure stuff out. I hack. I don’t-- deduce. I program technology to capture data for me.”

“Well then capture some data baby!” She throws him the ball again, with a teasing smile, and he catches it.

“I’d rather capture you!” He grabs Shy’s wrist, pulls her into him, onto his bed, wraps his body around hers, and curls on top of her, smoothly and quickly. “I learned that move from my mixed martial arts mentor. Slick, right?”

Though giggling, she’s stunned and disoriented, “Oh my God that was fast-- Whoa-- I thought you were a musical tech-savvy poet. Ya mean to tell me you’re secretly a karate jock, with predatory urges?” She stares back at him as the song changes to Michael Jackson’s “Rock With You”.

He scoffs, “Ha! I’m no predator. Or jock. But I do have the urge-- to tickle you!”

Suddenly, he tickles her like crazy.

She giggles up a storm, trying to escape his soft, silky light finger strokes. He blows raspberries on her arm, making her squeal, laughing. Then she suddenly gasps, as she realizes Skyler is kissing her shoulder and neck-- softly-- and slowly-- as he caresses her face gently with his hand. She whispers to him, breathy.

“Sky--”

“I know what you’re thinking--”, He kisses her neck softly, “You think you can just-- take me on a date and--”, He kisses her neck softly, “Romance me. Flatter me. Whisper sweet nothings into my ear--”, He kisses her neck softly, “And I’ll just fall into your arms-- And let you have your way with me--”, He kisses her neck softly, “But I will have you know-- That I am not that kind of guy--”.

He kisses her neck softly, “I am a *proper* gentleman--”, He kisses her neck softly, “And you will respect--”, He kisses her neck softly, “my right--”, He kisses her neck softly, “to take things slow--”, He kisses her neck softly.

She busts out laughing with him, as he cracks himself into a funny light chuckle, “Skyler-- Are you trying to use reverse psychology to lull me into a false sense of security, so I’ll accept your physical advances?” She laughs at it all.

Sky flirtatiously chortles, “False security? Not false.” He kisses her cheek-- and glides slowly toward her lips.

But she stops him, looking into his passionate, pertinacious eyes, with clear skepticism and concern in hers.

“You’re cute, Skyler.” She eyes him up and down, “*Very* cute-- actually,” She gulps to herself and looks away, to regain her intellectual composure.

He grins gleefully to himself at this.

“And you’re *very* persuasive. And--” Suddenly, she realizes, “*Secretly charming--*”, She shakes the scary thought out of her head, “But I’m a-- I’m-- um-- well-- I’m not the type who-- I mean--”

She stammers flittingly, thinks hard, and changes to an easier path, "Just, uh-- Tell me a secret."

He smiles goofily at her, "I'm a really good kisser."

She laughs, smacking his arm, "No-- A REAL secret."

Sky chuckles knowingly, thinks about it, and pauses, "OK." He pulls out the Cross on his key chain, looks at it, and hesitantly-- he lays it in her hand, and curls her fingers around it, gently.

She admires it curiously, not yet knowing the full profundity of what this means to him. She could sense that he was possessive over it. Protective over it. And that it meant something to him. But the fact he put it in her hands now--

--What did that mean?

--What was this old, beat-up looking, white wooden Cross to Skyler Stone?

What Shy doesn't know, is that Skyler already told her what this Cross meant to him-- without saying it-- on their walk back to his motorcycle, right before they left the mall.

Sky looks into her eyes, "I-- hack everyone in my life."

"Meaning?" She surveys his Cross with fascination.

"Meaning-- I'm like you. I trust no one. So I hack them. If I learn somebody's name-- I instantly hack their whole world, til I learn every good, bad, and ugly thing about 'em.

"I'm a compulsive hacker. Cause I compulsively don't trust people. Thank my Dad for teaching me that."

She eyes him dubiously, "You're a Scorpio, aren't you?"

He looks surprised, "Wow, you really *are* a prophet."

She sighs, "Don't have to be a prophet to see that." She smirks at their circumstances, "So you planned every second of this night, like a seductive, calculated mastermind-- *didn't you?* You got a million secrets I'll never know. And you're gonna stalk me, aren't ya?

“Oh God --You already have, haven’t you? You’re stalking me online right now with-- with one of your-- snoop programs or something, aren’t you?”

He stares back at her, awed, “Wow. That mystical “God-created-the-stars” astro-nature stuff is *scary* accurate.”

Shy huffs, shaking her head in disbelief.

He reels her back in, as the song changes to Prince’s “The Greatest Romance”. “OK, OK. I’ll tell you a real secret. One only my Dad and best buddy Zack know.”

She glares at him in angry fear, “Oh my God-- Skyler, if you tell me you’re The Valentine Killer-- I’m gonna--”

“I’m a virgin. Like you.” He says simply.

Shy stares at him, stunned. Then suddenly-- She looks pissed.

“I would have sooner believed you were The Valentine Killer. Now stop lying, Skyler. It’s not cool. I know you read my file. You’re just copying me. *Like a chameleon.*”

“I’m not lying. Or mirroring you, Shy.” But for some reason, he’s not surprised that she doesn’t believe him. Because if it wasn’t for Theresa’s file on her-- he might not have even believed Shy either. In their generation, it was hard to find socially connected young adults who actually-- *intentionally*-- lived by any strong sexual morals, physical boundaries, or carnal discipline.

Or an original thought.

In fact, he thought he was alone in that category, and was incredibly ecstatic to find out that he wasn’t-- that another spiritual soul like him existed, near him, not far away-- and that she was everything he wanted in a girl.

Too bad he had to lie to her to get her to see him.

But he’ll do whatever it takes to get her.

Even if it means asking for her forgiveness later--

--After he’s already got her hooked.

He looks at her sincerely, and speaks his mind-- words he knows she'll agree with, "Sex is a big deal. If sex wasn't a big deal, then rape and adultery wouldn't be a big deal. That's how you know it's a big deal. When stealing it-- feels like an epic crime-- or a powerful loss."

She huffs at him, "I know you're lying, Skyler. Look at all this. You had this whole night planned out to a "T"-- like Dracula. And I see the way you cut your eyes at me. And the way girls look at you everywhere we go. Like they wanna get with you. They can smell the seduction on you.

"You hide it beneath this cute, fake, Geek Boy Wonder persona you've created for yourself, but *clearly*, you know what you're doing. And everybody's wrapped around your... little pinky finger. --Like a glove. --Just like you wrapped me up in it." She narrows her eyes at him, "You have a secret split personality people don't know about, don't you?"

He could freak out right now, worrying that he's losing her, to her girly paranoia hyper-drive. But no matter how he reassesses the situation-- the fact remains: he's got her-- in his room, in his divan, in his arms-- and she's not trying to get away-- *yet*. That means her *heart likes* being in his arms-- even if her *mind* is *unsure* about it. And she's a girl.

Girls follow their heart.

So Sky ignores her cerebral fears, with a knowing and pleasant countenance, on his irresistibly beguiling face, and just gazes at her, unmoved.

"Ask me why."

She huffs at him, annoyed and frustrated, "Why what?"

"Why I'm waiting. Like you."

Shy stares back at him, hostile, "That would require me to believe you're actually waiting. *Like me*."

"Ask me why."

She sighs, rolling her eyes, “Why Sky? Why ya gonna lie to the girl named Shy, with The Prophet Eye?”

“I’m waiting, because I see the spirituality of sex. Like you. I see the sensuality. The morality. All the hidden layers and dimensions most people don’t see. A sacred beauty. Truth. The connected transformation of two souls into one. How it’s meant to evolve humans, as a spiritual act of love. Not a sport. Or a dating requirement. But a cementing bond. A connection that never breaks. --That UNBREAKABLE CONNECTION.”

He sources back to the passage she read from his book, “But society ruins it. We turn it into this common, meaningless, grotesque thing. Even our voyeurism is gross. That’s why I don’t like porn. It’s corny, ugly, and empty. Soulless. It’s not real. Not beautiful. Sensual. Spiritual.

“It’s like taking a song and killing the melody-- scrambling the lyrics, so all you have left are a jumbled up pile of random words and noise that mean nothing. So we ruin sex. Just like we ruin love. Then we call empty or perverted sex “love”, to further political agendas-- or to justify trashy behavior.

“As we-- call *actual* love-- non-existent. Or unimportant. Or unrealistic and foolish, in our daily lives. We throw superbowl parties for football. The biggest event of the year. Just to throw a ball across a field. But when it comes to sex and love-- the sharing of 2 souls-- we treat it like it’s nothing. Like it’s just going to the movies.

“Or sneezing.

“I could never make love to a woman who thinks like that. Like sex and love are just a trip to the store. But yet she makes a big deal over gossip, or shoes, or other mundane nothingness. I can’t be with somebody who doesn’t-- *get it*. Who doesn’t *feel it*. Who doesn’t-- *BOND*.”

Shy's glare at Skyler softens, into a bit of stunned awe, and now-- curious desire.

"Believe it or not, Shy, I read your manuscript, cover to cover. And I know you're use to sleazy liars and pretentious perverts telling you how most people are all perverts, and that the few people who are sensitive or emotional about sex are just "unevolved children".

"But ya know, I found it's the other way around. It's the people who *can't* spiritually or emotionally connect with sex, love, and other things, and see-- all the many layers of dimensions that there are-- who are unevolved."

She takes his words in carefully and seriously as the song changes to Anita Baker's "Sweet Love".

"Jus clumsily, cluelessly, callously, coldly throwing sex and other sacred things around like a football. So busy trying to PLAY God, that we take God OUT of sex, like we foolishly take God out of EVERYTHING-- and *gut it like a pig*. Like we're just irreverently deaf, dumb, blind babies. *With no respect for the complex inner workings and wired connections inside of things*.

"That's why, jus like money-- *I control sex. Sex doesn't control me*. So you can *trust me*, Shy. Cause I'm *different*, like *you*. And I see what you see, angel. Cause I'm deep like you. I love truth too. I'm not like other guys in your life. *Trust me*. I understand you. And I'm *not that guy*-- who makes a girl feel bad-- for being a *good person*. Or a *creative thinker*. Or a *truth seer*. Or *wholesome*. *Educated*. *Aware*.

"I-- *love* all those things about you, Shy. And I'm surrounded by people every day. But somehow-- your rare values and vision and-- *passion*-- make me feel less alone. So now, whenever I see your pretty face-- all I wanna do is-- be your hero.

“And I’ll defend your heart, body, mind, spirit, soul and vision-- with all my passionate might. From earth to space, to the spirit realm, to the hidden secret ends of time. Today-- and always.”

Shyanne gazes back at him, lost in fixation on his eyes, completely hung on every word from his mouth. She stares at Sky for a beat, mystified. Then-- slowly--

--She kisses his lips.

She pulls back, tearfully admiring him, and he smiles warmly at her. Then he gently wipes a slight tear from her eye, as she smiles downward, bashfully.

He wants to kiss her.

Badly.

And now-- he does.

He leans in and kisses her lips sweetly, with a kind, jovial smile that makes her smile.

Then he kisses her more-- *sultry*-- pulling her leg in, closer to him, by the back of her knee, wrapping her body around his, as she relinquishes her grip of his key chained Cross onto his deep, dark, ocean blue bed comforter, beside her, and he takes off his motorcycle sunglasses and puts them on his night stand, as he taps the button on his cell phone-- to dim the lights.

CHAPTER

[23]

MEET THE ASSAILANT

Group1Crew's electric-bounce dance track "Manipulation" blasts from the backyard speakers at Nathan's luscious house-- which is more like a small mansion-- as half-naked Zack, Hadji and Steven play nighttime water sports, in their swim trunks, tossing a football around, in the big, beautiful, elegant, crystal swimming pool, that glows with the soft, mystical pink lights, radiating from inside its walls.

Hadji's trunks are plain, clingy, gray cotton. Steven's are long, black, slick, and Zack's are blue matte-- plastered with the goofy grinning face of a yellow cartoon sponge.

Still fully clothed in his school uniform, Nathan sips on his red slurpee, with a bluetooth in his ear, and oxygen tube up his nose, as he humorously watches the game, striving to play with them from the surface, trying-- and often failing-- to catch the ball, whenever they throw it to him.

Steven jumps out of the pool, dripping wet and smelling like chlorine, waltzes toward the clear, shiny, glass, marble patio table in the fancy yard, and grabs a handful of turkey and ham sandwiches, from a towering plate of mini sandwiches.

He sees black-bikini-clad Lissette, looking miserable, as she lounges on a shiny new pool chair, sipping on a glass goblet, with her blingy Cross earrings brushing against her shoulders. He chews a sandwich as he stares curiously at her.

“Who peed in your corn flakes this fine Friday evening?”

She gripes, bitterly, “He dumped us.”

He looks confused, “What?”

She rolls her eyes, “He lied. He aint doin family stuff. I followed him to her house. Dat goofy prophet chick who was friends with Theresa. Skyler dumped us all. --For *HER*. ”

Steven stares at her in horrified disbelief, “You followed Sky? Like- a stalker?”

Lissette just glares at him, pissed, “Yeah. --*And?*”

He pouts like a sad puppy, “How come ya never stalk *me?*”

“Cause I don’t care about *you*. ”

“And Sky doesn’t care about *you*. ”

“Shut up.” She throws her glass goblet at him.

Steven ducks.

It crashes.

Nathan looks.

“Sorry, Nathan. I owe you one.” Lissette involuntarily growls at him, trying not to take all her anger out on him.

“It’s cool!” Nathan takes a deep, labored breath, “Never liked that glass!” He takes a deep, labored breath, looking ecstatic just to have their company, in his lonely “latchkey” home. Apparently, he’s just happy they’re all there with him.

Steven laughs.

Lissette glares. “*WHAT??*”

“See Lissette? Sky doesn’t hate you. You’re just not his type. Sky... He likes-- like-- mystical fairy princesses ‘n jazz. Whereas, you’re like-- a transparently hood chick.”

She snaps at him, “I can be a freakin’ fairy princess if I freakin’ wanna be!”

Steven laughs at her.

Lissette barks at him, “Stop freakin’ laughin at me, ho! I’ll drown you in this pool like The Valentine Killah!”

Nathan, Hadji, and Zack all stop playing, and stare at her. She sucks her teeth, rolling her eyes.

“Oh you know what I mean.”

Zack smirks, as they all go back to playing water ball.

“Yeah. I know what you mean, Lissette.” His soothing, empathetic tone sounds like he really does understand-- yet-- that doesn’t really matter to Lissette, at this point.

“But 1 day you have to face the fact you can’t control what sexually turns people on-- or *off*-- about you.” Steven eyes the broken goblet glass shattered all over the deck. Tis what it is, missy. And if I know Sky, he’s already got Fairy Princess wrapped around his finger. And he aint lettin’ go. Sky doesn’t love easy, but he does loves hard. *And he never lets anyone go.* So for all we know, he maybe found wifey.”

She gasps, looking up at him, horrified, “No.”

“Yes.” He nods seriously to her, “The man knows what he wants, Lissette. He doesn’t stop till he gets it. An if she’s what he wants, then he’s going to get and keep her and you’re gonna have to learn to be nice to her. Possibly for years.”

“I aint bein’ nice to dat bitch.”

Steven squats down to her level, and holds her hand.

--Almost as if consoling a delusional, mental patient.

“Lissette. Sky targeted the 1 he wants. Went after her. And now he’s got her. If you so much as make any glimmer of a thought that you want her gone, *you’ll* be the 1st to go. Hate to break it to you but people follow their loins, before they follow their playmates.” He adds as the song changes to Andy Hunter’s Trip Remix of Thousand Foot Krutch’s “I Get Wicked”.

“And as much as Sky likes you-- if he has to weigh the health-hazardous hood chick, against the mystical fairy princess, that he’s always wanted his whole entire life-- *ever since he was a wee little lad.*”, He adds an Irish accent for endearing effect, “--The princess is gonna *WIN*.”

“So instead a sittin’ up here in a miserable funk, tryna figure out ways to forever ruin your friendship with Sky-- and thus us all, while we’re all in the pool having fun-- why don’t ya stop wasting your love on guys out there, who don’t see you like that, and start stalking the ones here, who do?” Steven pecks Lissette on the cheek, gives her a sandwich, runs back to the guys, jumps and cannon-balls into the pool.

SPLASH!

Stunned Lissette realizes Steven is talking about himself. But she’s too pissed. And she decided years ago, back when Sky got in a fight with that Slutty Racist Car Thief Boy, who threatened to shoot Lissette with a beebee gun, if she ever squealed on him about his sick shady behavior, to her only female friend-- the 1 who Slutty Racist Car Thief Boy cheated on, with that Slutty Racist Blow Job Girl-- who was new to town-- that Steven wasn’t her type.

I mean, sure, Steven was cute, in his stylish-haired, skinny-jeans, gold-ear-stud, punk-rock-prep, sort of way.

But the fact of the matter was--

Skyler defended her-- Steven didn’t.

Skyler was always defending Lissette-- Steven never did.

Not once.

He punked out, every single time he had an opportunity to socially have her back. Unless it was easy. Unless someone else did it 1st. Otherwise, he was too quiet, shy and afraid of his own shadow to make any waves for her. Meanwhile--

Skyler would shake the whole damn ocean for her.

Like he was The King of The Ocean.

She liked that.

She wanted that.

She would fight for that.

Then, of course, there was the fact he was beautiful and brilliant and didn't know it. Well, he knew he was brilliant. But he didn't seem to be nearly as aware of his beauty.

Lisette liked that too.

But it wasn't just that.

There were plenty of smart and hot guys at their school, who she could moon over. Skyler was different, however.

Because Skyler--

--was her hero.

But Steven's right. Sky is distracted by his new girly fairy princess. He needs time to get her out of his system. So Lisette would begrudgingly take a backseat, and wait for him to get sick of her. Or for her to lose interest in him.

And then she would have him all to herself again.

She would find a way to be with him.

No matter what.

Whatever it took.

Even if it meant she had to be a monster in the meantime -- quenching her thirst with violent outbursts-- releasing all that passionate tension inside her the only way she knew how--

--Physically.

Accepting her new gameplan, Lissette angrily stuffs down her sandwich, and eyes the boys-- all distracted, playing water football in the pool. Annoyed by it all, she gets up and goes to the back door, to go in and use the bathroom.

But the door is locked. She pulls on the door to open it any way, but it refuses to open. So she falls back, and hits the ground, scraping the palms of her hands and elbows, on the hard, gritty, cemented pool patio deck-- bloody.

Frustrated, she readjusts her bikini top. Then she hears a rustle in the bushes surrounding the yard, looks up, and sees a dark, shadowy figure, outlined by the bright white moonlight, in the dark night sky as they watch her from behind a tall oakwood fence. Then the figure dashes away.

Pissed Lissette runs after them, "OH NO YOU DON'T YOU FREAKIN' PEEPING TOM! I'LL MESS YOU UP!"

Lissette runs around the fence, knocking over trash cans that spill out onto the ground. She darts forward, looking around the dark, woodsy yard, behind Nathan's neighbor's mini-mansion-- where the stalker was watching her from.

Then she feels a cold, square, metal object under her bare foot, looks down, and sees a blood-red, digital camera, laying in the cleanly cut, rich, green grass. She picks it up, looks through it, and sees photos of herself lounging on the pool chair, and the guys playing by the pool.

Now she's REALLY enraged.

"WHAT DA FUDGE YOU THINK YOU DOIN' TAKIN' OUR PICTURES N SHIT! I'LL FREAKIN' MESS YOU UP BITCH!"

Lissette turns, and--

BAM!

A giant gardening shovel smacks her square in the face. From inside the pool, Zack, Hadji, Steven and Nathan look up.

“Hey-- You hear all that raucous?” Zack looks curious.

“Where’s Lissette?” Hadji looks around, baffled.

They all jump out the pool and run-- or wheel over-- to the fence and knocked over waste bins, where Lissette went. Zack steps in garbage that spilled out on the pavement, sees trash stuck to the bottom of his flip-flops, groans, annoyed now, and follows the guys over to Lissette, who’s bloody-faced, and knocked out, on the ground, as a dark shadow grabs the red camera from her hand, and runs off-- like a ninja.

--Steven--

--freaks--

--OUT--

“OH MY GOD-- LISSETTE!!!”

CHAPTER

[24]

MEET DETECTIVE STONE'S TORMENT

The keys jingle faintly, as Detective Sirius Stone unlocks the front door and leisurely strolls into his home, carrying 3 big boxes of delicious smelling, extra large pizza, in one hand, and his old, dark brown, leathery satchel, in the other. The case file photo of Jaleel's girlfriend, Brook Bradley, pokes out of his work case, as he whistles cheerfully, and relocks the front door.

He glides through the house until he reaches The Game Room. Then he opens the door, sees no one-- and abruptly stops whistling-- suddenly confused-- and mildly alarmed.

No Skyler and his friends-- gaming-- or studying-- or eating-- or napping-- or laughing-- or otherwise existing-- in The Game Room, whenever he got home around this time, on a Friday Night?

This was *never* normal--

--Unless something was *wrong*.

He puts the pizzas down on the pool table, looks behind the game room door, and sees no one. Just another forgotten pair of Zack's barely broken-in sandals.

Then he glances back at Skyler's neon white, black light reflective, graffiti-art style Cross on the wall, behind the pool table, and he lingers there for a moment, regarding it.

--As if it reminds him-- of something more than simply, the worldwide phenomenon and ethereal enigma, of the spiritual supernatural dimension, or faith and intuition, in a Higher Power. But like it represents something more tangible, tragic-- and intimately personified to him--

Like it reminds him--

--of his first love.

--*His late wife.*

He gets a quick flashback of her, twirling in her pretty pink sun dress, smiling beautifully, and kissing him. They laughed together, as he hugged her, holding her in his arms, cradling her in a warm, cozy, tender snuggle of love.

"I love you." He told her honestly.

"I love you more." She teased back, "My Sirius Stone."

He indulged his senses, in the alluring aroma, of her hypnotizing, vanilla perfume-- his favorite fragrance-- thinking to himself how, everything about her, was an irresistibly intoxicating aphrodisiac.

Then he would notice her gold Cross necklace, as it shimmered in the sunlight, on her soft, full chest.

He jerks back slightly, from the graffiti-painted Game Room wall, with a pained jolt of sorrow and loss, as a dark cloud of hurt melancholia, overwhelms his face.

Then he gets another flashback, of his tall, stocky, tough-bodied, but sweet-faced, 16-year-old son, Sirius Stone Junior, working with him, on his black and neon orange race car, out in the garage, as they tinkered on the engine, under the hood together, like mechanics, both rubbing their heads, and swiping black oil streaks across their faces, looking dirty.

He playfully rubbed the back of Sirius Stone Junior's head, with Fatherly pride, "Like Father, like son." He chuckled at him.

Then he remembers a glimpse of him and his junior namesake, laughing, drinking, and toasting cold, wet soda cans with each other, leaned back in old family rocking chairs, on the front porch, and playing football together out in the yard.

Finally, he recalls how his son came home from school one day, wearing his pristine, burgundy red, white and gold, leather letterman's jacket, over his Secret Ridge Christian High School uniform, and an old, worn, red and gold baseball cap on his head, with a neon white, black light reflective, graffiti-art style Cross on it. Sirius Jr. pulled a brochure out from his pocket and handed it to his Dad.

"I'm gonna join the military, Dad." He said to him, "I wanna fight for my country. --I wanna be a marine."

Mr. Stone exhales slightly, looking down at The Game Room floor, in staggering torment, like he's just been sucker-punched in the gut. And the sting of the unexpected shock, is just as stabbing, as the sting of the pain itself.

He tries to push the memories away, stunned by the sudden realization, that he still feels these wounds, like they're still fresh and unhealed, after all these years-- a whole decade later.

The detective blinks away his lost, red, watery eyes, in his silent bereavement, then turns, and exits Skyler's Game Room-- leaving the pizzas on the pool table.

CHAPTER

[25]

MEET THE SECRET PLAN

Detective Stone sprints around the house, checking the livingroom, as he passes an old record player, and a big old, dark, reddish brown, mahogany wall shelf, that holds up the big screen TV, which looks much newer than the old, beat up one, used for video games in The Game Room. He sees the old, flowery vase, over by the couch, with its floral pastel Cross on it, and fake dusty pink flowers they never took out of it.

But he doesn't see his son.

Or any trace of his son's friends.

So he rechecks the kitchen, worried, and passes an old, dusty, light brown plaque, that reads, "The Family That Prays Together Stays Together", with a dark brown Cross on it.

Still no Skyler-- or his friends.

"*SKYLER?! YOU HOME??!*" He shouts out, anxiously, at the unusual-- and unnerving-- dead silence of his home. Then he hoofs up the stairs, and tries Skyler's white door, turning the golden knob. To his surprise-- and maybe relief-- it's locked. So he knocks. "Skyler? You in there? Hey-- You OK??"

Inside Skyler's bedroom, Earth Wind & Fire's funky pop groove "Keep Your Head To The Sky" plays softly, as shirtless Sky wakes up, spooning with a sleeping, but fully clothed, Shy-- his arms snuggled warmly around her. Einstein, lays on his back, belly up, wagging his tail, chewing a snack stick.

Groggy Skyler rubs his eyes, looks at Einstein, furrows his brow, glances over at his bag of doggy chew sticks, up on the shelf, by his bed, and then he looks back at his dog.

"How'd you get into those snacks, boy?"

He smiles curiously at his pooch, as he pets Einstein's belly and head, and he scratches him behind the ears, lovingly. Then his eyes drift over to the clock, and he sees that the time reads 12:00 AM-- Midnight.

--His eyes widen in humorous awe--

He sprints up, followed closely by his loyal, curious, tail-wagging bff, Einstein, and creeps past the Cross-shaped picture frame, displaying his smiling family photo, as he tiptoes to his door. Slowly, Sky creaks his door open, to see if his Dad has come home yet-- And he jumps, startled, seeing his worried Dad smack-dab, right in his face--

"Dad!"

"Skyler! What happened? Where are all your friends? No Geek Nite? Oh-- Don't tell me somebody else died."

There was genuine exhaustion and fed up exasperation in his voice-- but the fatigue was more moral than physical, and the brewing disgust, was apparently teeing him up, for an epic eruption of angry retribution, that would show up later.

Sky stammers nervously, "No um, they had, family stuff."

Detective Stone stares at his son, "Kay... You know I'm a detective, right, son? If you're gonna lie to me, at least respect my intelligence and skills enough to lie *BETTER*. I mean-- it IS my profession ya know--"

“Sorry, Dad, no, I just-- I’m tired.” Sky shrugs, genuinely drowsy, but not because he’s sleepy-- rather, because he just woke up.

Einstein tries to open Sky’s door, so he can squeeze out and join Sky. Sky lets him out and closes his door quickly, as Dad tries to look in his room. Sky pets the rambunctious pooch, who dances around excitedly, begging for another chew.

Back inside Skyler’s bedroom, Shyanne awakens in Sky’s bed-- and shakes uncontrollably, having a prophet seizure.

Out in the hall, Skyler huffs at his Dad, casually, “Why can’t you just believe my friends had family stuff?”

Dad folds his arms, knowingly, “Cause Hadji’s obsessed with gaming, so he’s always here. Steven’s obsessed with Lissette, so he’s always here. Lissette’s obsessed with *you*, so she’s always here. Zack’s parents are always fighting, making him obsessed with finding *any* escape possible, away from the war zone that is his home, so he’s always here.

“And Nathan-- Poor kid’s lame, in a wheelchair, and his parents are never home. Absentee parents of the latchkey kid generation. Only met em once. I hate parents like that. They think giving him their money is just as good as giving him their time. So purely from obsession to escape loneliness-- he’s always here. I know your friends, Sky. I make sure I do before they come into your life, and into this house. Unless you’re hiding something. Now-- What’s behind the door, Sky?

“Nothing.”

“What’s going on, Skyler?”

“Nothing.”

“Skyler.”

“I’m working on a program, OK?”

It wasn’t totally a lie.

After all-- Skyler is *ALWAYS* working on a program.

“Half-naked, looking like you just woke up? Working on a program?” The skepticism in his voice is almost laughing.

Almost.

“Yes, OK? Was that a good enough lie respecting of your intelligence and amazing job profession skills?” Skyler yawns, apathetically, petting Einstein into submission.

Inside his bedroom, Shy’s seizure stops. She slowly sits up, rising like a zombie, with an ominous look in her eyes, like she’s a different person.

--A diabolical person.

She swings her legs around to the floor, and arises, standing and staring at Skyler’s computer. She glides over to it, opens his desk drawer, takes a sporty blue flash drive out of it, sticks it into his computer, and types covertly on the keyboard, looking very dark and suspicious.

Out in the hallway, Skyler’s Dad sighs, and looks at Sky warily, as if bracing for the worst.

“Who’s in there, Skyler? Which one of your weird friends is in there with you?”

Skyler stares back at him, sighing, “A new friend.”

“A new friend?”

“A new friend.”

“Damn it, Sky. I thought I raised you better than this. If you’re gonna do your weird creepy crap, the least you can do is keep it outside of this house.”

Skyler looks confused, “What? What weird creepy crap? All we did was ki--”

“I don’t wanna know-- I really don’t wanna know how you all do-- what ever it is-- you do-- Just-- don’t do it inside this house. Period.”

Skyler stares back at his Father, beyond confused, “Dad-- With all due respect-- What the hell are you talkin’ about?”

Dad heaves a grieving sigh, shaking his head. “It’s all this perverted gay crap on TV is what it is. Cause I know I raised you better than that. Unless you were molested as a child and didn’t tell me. Someone touch you wrong, boy?”

Skyler gawks at him, in completely mortified shock and disgusted horror, “*WHAT??!*”

“Was it a cop? Ya can tell me. I’ll *make* him disappear.”

“Oh. OK. Stop. Oh my God. Stop. No--”

“Was it a teacher?”

Skyler stares back at his Dad in completely horrified and speechless awe. Then he silently opens his door, to reveal Shyanne, sitting at his computer, holding the pink stuffed toy that he won her. She waves a friendly hello at Detective Stone, who waves back, stunned. Skyler closes his door, and glares back, in offended disbelief at his embarrassed Dad.

“What were you sayin’ about all those sharp detective skills I should respect and appreciate?”

Dad lifts his hands up, apologetically, “Sky--”

“Oh my GOD, Dad. --You thought I was *GAY*? Of all things? *GAY*? --SERIOUSLY?” Skyler gawks at him as the song on his iPod changes to Israel Houghton’s warm ballad, “Others”.

“Well-- when you said all that martial arts, eye of the tiger, hippy liberal, spiritual, LA LA Land crap, about keeping your body and soul, pure and abstinent, I seriously thought that was code for something else.”

Skyler gapes back at him in jaw-dropped offense, insulted.

“Dad!”

“What? You read women’s fiction romance novels, and said you’re great in art class. I thought that was code too.”

“Dad-- I already told you-- I read those novels to improve my game with the ladies-- which, apparently-- works like a charm--” Sky proudly gestures toward his bedroom door with a humorously cocksure grin at his Dad, who shakes his head at his son, in laughing awe.

“And there are plenty of masculine men who are artists. In fact, creating art is an act of the spirit. And the spirit realm is a masculine energy. Just like the mental realm is a masculine energy. And how the physical and emotional realms are both the feminine energy of the Yin Yang energy balance. If you just analyze the universe you’ll see that--”

Stone closes his eyes, sighing, in knowing dismissiveness. Just when he thinks his only son, Skyler, is like him in *any way*-- he has to go and ruin it.

Again.

“Oh my God, here we go again, with all that hippy existential crap.”

“Dad-- I’m not a hippy. Hippies are sluts. No offense to hippies, but-- *they know they bout that life.*”

“Oh, God-- OK-- I’m just glad you’re-- just-- oh-- Thank God--” He hugs Skyler tight, “You just made my parenting job so much easier than I thought it was gonna have to be.”

Smooched into him, Skyler croaks out, “OK, but I’m extremely offended that my own *top detective* Dad, thought I was so mentally ill, that I don’t like girls.”

“Good, son. Good. I’m so glad you’re offended.”

“But what would you have done if I *WAS* that kind of lost and troubled soul?”

“I da loved you any way, praying and crying myself to sleep each night.”

“Good, Dad. Good. I’m so glad your love would surpass your misery.”

Stone stops hugging his son, to resume guiding him, “Oh but-- you’re still not allowed to have girls in your room.”

“What about Lissette?”

“Oh you know what I mean. Girls who get your spidy senses tingling.”

Sky laughs with his proud Dad.

“She’s beautiful though. Angel face-- Thick and voluptuous-- My boy’s got *GOOD taste*-- heheh.”

He fist bumps his blushing son, Sky, who laughs, fist bumping him back.

“Looks like she was raised too. Not like mosta these kids nowadays. You take her on a fun date and whisper sweet nothings in her ear like I taught ya?”

Skyler nods, grinning, “Followed your playbook to a T-- Worked so well I think you should copyright it.”

Daddy Stone laughs, nodding, and pats Sky’s shoulder proudly, “Good job, son. Good job. That’s exactly how I caught your Mother.”

Skyler beams proudly, “Baby bear did good?”

“Baby bear did good.”

“Papa bear proud?”

“Papa bear proud. Very proud. But now seriously-- get her out. No sex till you’re 18. Or 21. And paying bills. And-- married. I dunno-- Whatever the Bible says.”

Sky teases him, “Do *YOU* even know what the Bible says?”

“Do *YOU*?” Dad challenges him, to deflect.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him, shall not perish-- but have everlasting life-- John 3:16.” Sky challenges back with a serious smile, “YES I know the Bible.”

“You know it by heart.” His Dad nods, impressed.

“Yeah. Do you?” Skyler nods back, curious now.

His Dad heaves a yielding shrug, “Skyler, I’m a bad Christian just like everybody else. Your Mom was the devout one. But you’re a minor. So you’re obligated to be a *good* Christian. Until you’re 18-- Or 21-- and paying all the bills. Then you can be as *bad* a Christian as you want.”

“See this is why I have a spiritual guru, for my inner spirit guidance.”

“Yeah a spiritual guru I pay out the nose for. Didn’t you get the black-belt? Why do you still need him?”

“To maintain my total wellness, fitness and overall excellence, Dad. Unless YOU’RE gonna do all that. On top of all your heavy duty case work.”

“Check’s in the mail.” Dad raises his hands, conceding dismissively, as he shakes his head, and turns to leave.

Sky laughs, “Uh huh, that’s what I thought.”

“Out, Skyler. Get the pretty girl out of your bedroom-- and put on a shirt. You can show off your tough guy muscles to her down at the gym. Oh and there’s pizza downstairs.” Mr. Stone proceeds back down the stairs.

“Ooh! Sweet!” Skyler gestures a score motion, excited, and opens his bedroom door.

He swings back into his room, bends over to grab his red shirt from off the floor, and drapes it over his shoulder, as Shy sits in front of his computer, facing him-- and waiting for his flash drive to finish loading.

“Hey-- There’s pizza downstairs. Let’s chow down!” He gestures for her to join him, extending his hand to her, to help her up, like a gentleman, as he absentmindedly and rhythmically taps the side of his jeans. Then he realizes something’s missing. He quickly looks down, grabs the keys to his bike from inside his pocket and looks at them, horrified.

His big, dirty, old, white, wooden Cross-- is not there.

He immediately looks back up at Shyanne, “Did you see my white Cross key chain?”

She furrows her brow, looking confused, “No. Why?”

“It’s missing.” He immediately darts over to his bed and starts stripping it completely-- tearing up his room, frantically looking for his Cross-- but he can’t find it. “I’ve never lost it before. I even replace the key chain it’s hooked on, every year, just to make sure it never falls off.”

Shy discretely checks his computer screen, to see if his flash drive is finished loading, as he goes back and forth, in a frenzied focus, desperately searching for his old, white wooden Cross. Finally, he steps in front of her again, “You’d tell me if you saw it right? Like-- Even if you broke it by accident or something? It’s OK-- I-- I won’t get upset--”

But he looks like he would get upset.

Because he’s already upset.

But she shakes her head at him, looking genuinely confused by his freaked out fury and upset, as the song changes to The Mcanary Remix of Toby Mac’s “Do You Know?”. Then she looks behind him, furrowing her brow, with concern, “Did I just see someone walk past your doorway?”

“Oh, you mean my Dad?”

“No. Not your Dad.”

“What?”

Concerned Sky rushes to his entrance, grabbing a cold, metal baseball bat from behind his door. As soon as his back is turned, Shy grabs the blue USB from out of his computer, right as it finishes, and she slips it into her pocket.

Skyler peeks his head outside of his door, holding his baseball bat like he's about to score a home-run. But he sees nothing. All he hears is his Dad shuffling around in the kitchen, downstairs. So he turns to look back at Shy, and jumps-- startled-- seeing her standing right there.

"Guess it was just my imagination." She shrugs, smiles, hugs him, and kisses him sweetly on the lips. Then she rubs the side of his face, near his chin, "You need a shave."

She affectionately taps his cheeks, making him smile affectionately at her, because he likes this new, and lost, feeling of relational preening, from a feminine touch. He eyes her warmly and flirtatiously, as she saunters out of his room, humming her haunting melody.

Then he looks on, after her, grinning-- mystified-- and puts his baseball bat down, standing it up on his floor, instantly disarmed by Shyanne's soft kiss, and beautiful, flirty smile. He jolts slightly, remembering the food, and puts his bat back, behind the door. Then he glances at his computer, and stops, confused, realizing that the screen is on. But nothing looks any different on it.

A glimmer of slight suspicion flicks through his face-- as if he's about to go over and check his computer. But then he sees the pink teddy bear that he won for Shy, sitting on his desk, in front of the center of the screen. So he rethinks it, kind of laughing to himself at his own paranoia, and instead, he shuts his door-- and goes downstairs, to join his Dad and his new girlfriend.

But behind her pink teddy bear, a small red pop up box on the computer screen reads, "Action Complete. Would you like to continue?"

Downstairs, Sky and Shy eat away at their limitless supply of scrumptious, sausage and tomato topped, baked flat dough, in all its cheesy, gooey goodness, as they watch the movie, *Gangster Squad*, on the big screen TV, relaxing together on the couch, by the dusty pastel floral Cross vase.

“Ahh! Yes!” Shy youthfully scores her arm, with a triumphant grin, at a cinematic win for the good guys-- the good cops-- in the story.

Sky chuckles at her excitement, having seen this movie, like, a million times already. He kisses her cheek sweetly, still making her blush, scoots forward, and gets up, grabbing their empty plates and cups, to go refill their drinks. In the kitchen, he notices Dad’s brown leather work satchel on the table, with the photo of a familiar face peeking out of a case file. He pulls it out and examines it.

It’s Jaleel’s girlfriend, Brook Bradley.

Also known to Skyler and Shyanne as:

Aerobics Girl--

The sweaty, work-out blonde, from iWin’s “Death To Believers” cheerleading video, that he watched with Shyanne, in her livingroom, the first day he met her. He quickly pulls it out and reads, “Church Playground Valentine Victim, Jaleel Jackson Junior’s fiancée”-- with her physical address next to it. Then Shyanne pops up, startling him.

“Ooh! I wanna go with you when you go to meet her!”

He jerks back, stunned at her, “*Meet her? Why would I do that?*”

“Cause that’s what any good detective does. They interview the suspects, and try to find hidden connections.”

Skyler exhales, honestly, “I’m not a detective, Shy. I know how much you love murder mysteries, but I’m really not my Father. I’m a proactive tech whiz. Not a reactive mystery whiz. I build, not solve. I don’t plan to personally talk face to face with any of these dangerous people-- and I’m definitely not taking you with me, into the fire, to burn up beside me, like Theresa did.”

CLICK!

Shy takes a snapshot of the information in Skyler's hand with her phone.

"That's cool. I'll just go by myself."

She smiles back at him with child-like exuberance, turns, and goes back to eating pizza on the couch. Sky closes his eyes, and drops his head-- defeated.

ACT III: PART I - BROOK BRADLEY

CHAPTER

[26]

MEET BROOK

IT'S SATURDAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-JUSTICE DAY #2)-- and both Skyler and Shyanne now wear dark sunglasses and baseball caps, each with a humorously bedazzled image of the Cross on it, as they stand on the sunny porch of Brook Bradley's house. Blue-capped Skyler looks down, discretely-- and glances around nervously, as pink-capped Shyanne looks forward, brazenly-- and smiles at the door confidently.

Skyler absentmindedly reaches for his Cross key chain, by his pocket, but then stops, realizing that it's not there. He looks down, and remembers that it went missing last night. He furrows his brow, troubled by this.

Slowly, a tearful blonde girl, 6 inches shorter than Shyanne, answers the door. She wears the same exact type of work out sweatpants that she wore in the video-- only in a different color. This time they're gray.

As an introspective creator, Sky found it bizarre, how people could work so hard, to improve themselves on the *outside*, but never once try to know ANYTHING about themselves --or explore the spiritual nature of life-- on the *inside*.

To Sky, it was like buying the best looking computer-- but not being the least bit concerned *if* or *how* it worked; or *what* capacity, system, programs-- and viruses-- came with it.

Brook eyes them weakly, lost and forlorn, "Whadayou want?"

"The truth." Shy quickly cuts Sky off before he can speak, "Your fiance was murdered by The Valentine Killer, and we believe it was to make you feel bad, about being part of a hate cult, of anti-God supremacy terrorists, called-- "We Are God". --Do you feel bad yet?"

Sky gawks at Shy in mortified shock-- then turns to Brook, vehemently shaking his head at her, "NO".

Brook gazes back at Shy, in horrified delirium--

"What?"

Skyler intervenes, "Um, what she meant was-- What do you know about the "We Are God" group, and its connections to other supremacy cults, like *Wealth Is God* and *Whites Are God*?"

Brook furrows her brow at them, cloudy-brained, "Are you with the police?"

"Yes." Skyler nods.

"No." Shyanne shakes her head, "So you better tell us the truth. Or your parents are next."

Skyler stares at her, open-mouthed, "Shy! I mean-- *Red Falcon*!"

"My parents an I hate each other." Brook scowls at them.

"Oh. Well that explains a lot." Shy smirks.

"Can you just tell us?" Sky pleads politely, sincerely wanting to get out of there, as soon as humanly possible.

"NO." Brook glares in annoyance at them, "Not until I know who you are."

"Ah, so you admit that you know." Shy raises a knowing eyebrow.

"I never said that. I'm not admitting anything. Now who are you?" She barks at Shyanne.

“We’re trying to solve your case.” Sky tries to persuade her with sweetness.

“Wrong.” Shy blasts his ruse right out of the water-- and replaces it with something much more effective--

--*The truth.*

“We’re trying to solve OUR case, which will inadvertently solve YOUR case. Our friends in The Core 4 died, trying to find The Valentine Killer. When we find their killer-- we find your hot chocolate lover boy’s killer. And you can move on in peace, knowing that we caught the person, or people, responsible for teaching you a lesson, about being a horrible human being.”

“Oh my God--”, Skyler looks down in embarrassed disbelief.

But Shy just charges forward at full speed ahead, with 0 hesitation and NO 2nd thoughts, “Speak into the mic, sister.”

Skyler clears his throat nervously, “Um-- we’re sorry-- we-- my partner-- is new-- to the force-- and-- she--”

“Alright. Fine.” Brook snaps at them with a very distinct “snotty bitch” vibe, “But if Theresa and her magical “Core 4” crew couldn’t do anything, you two sure as hell can’t.”

Brook rolls her eyes, turns and goes back into her house --leaving the front door open, for them to follow her in.

Shocked Skyler looks at giddy Shyanne, completely awed that her blunt bulldozer approach actually worked-- and worked fast. She grins with excitement at him, electrified, and ready to bulldoze some more.

“See ya gotta be direct with these people. They’re like problem kids whose parents were too liberal to spank them whenever they were bad. So ya gotta smack ‘em around a bit.” Then she playfully speaks in a humorous British accent, “It can be quite fun, really.”

Shy shrugs merrily, and frolics into Brook’s house. Sky still looks on after her--

--jaw dropped.

Inside, now with their sunglasses perched atop their heads, Skyler and Shyanne sit, across from Brook, on a plush, velvety, beige couch, in her upscale, beige livingroom, beside a big, bright, crystal clear, windowed wall, which lets in a few streams of sunlight, shaded by the big oak trees that line her giant, grassy backyard and pool. Her house smells like the stinging smell of cleaning chemicals, as birds chirp cheerfully outside.

“OK, first of all, tell us how you know Theresa.” Skyler leans forward, trying to look relaxed.

Shy shakes her head, “No, first tell us how you can afford to live in an upscale home like this, if your parents hate you ‘n you’re all alone.”

“I’m a stripper.” Brook says it with a straight face.

Sky laughs, thinking she’s joking, as Shy stares at her, sensing that she’s not. Then he sees the serious look on Brook and Shy’s staring face, and he stops laughing.

“Oh-- you’re-- seriously a stripper.”

She shrugs, “It’s just like any other job.”

But Shy’s not letting her get away with that false pretense, and just nods at Brook, with a straight face, mocking her BS.

“Mmm. Right. Back when you were 5, and the teacher passed out all those *Dream Big* Cards to the class, with big cartoon pictures of people on them, next to career titles, like “fireman”, and “teacher”, and “nurse”, and then she asked you what you wanted to be when you grow up, --you looked that heifer straight in the eye, and you said,

“When I grow up, I want to be a godless, illegitimate, shell of a person, who opens her legs-- and lets the whole world inside-- as I gyrate naked, for fuggly, perverted, disgusting, unfaithful, dirty old married men, who secretly fantasize about choking me to death as they rape me up the ass, whenever they ram their sticky, crumpled up, dollar bills, down my butt-chaffing g-string, as my pimp-- I mean-- “BUSINESS MANAGER”, She curls her fingers in air quotes--

”slaps my ass, cusses me out for not letting the rich guys abuse me, and threatens to take a steep cut out of all my profits, if I don’t get on my knees for them-- even though he’ll already be stealing half my hard-
poled, Live-Porn-dancing money any way, so I’ll really be screwed either way. Both literally-- and figuratively. Because self-respect, peace of mind, dignity, morals, intelligence, spiritual happiness, and legitimate career skill sets-- are for losers.”

Brook glares at her, “Shut the hell up.”

“YOU shut the hell up.” Shyanne laughs at her, in amped up awe.

“Pole dancing is a respectable art, you strip-ophobic, anti-erotica bigot.”

“Oh please-- you *TRUTH* “ophobic”, anti-*MORALITY* “bigot”-- You’re not an *artist*. Don’t make me *LAUGH*. *I’M* a friggin’ *ARTIST*. Do you even know what the word “art” *means*? A true *artist* does their *art* whether they get *paid* for it or *not*.

“You don’t stay up late at night, strip-teasing for yourself in the mirror, when you’re all alone, because you just *love your-- “art”*-- so much, and *hope* someone will pay you for it someday.

“You’re not out on the street corner, live performing your striptease, for all the little kids and tourists who pass by, hoping they’ll drop a few coins in your hat, as an appreciation for your-- “art”. You don’t struggle to get a livable wage, craftsman respect and *any* attention for your-- “art”, because we live in a crass society, that doesn’t respect or appreciate art, unless it has a celebrity endorsement attached to it.

“*THAT’S* what actual *ARTISTS* go through. They *SUFFER* for their *ART*. Cause *ART* is *LIFE*. You’re not *LIFE*. You’re just... a *profoundly* lazy leech, with no moral compass-- or class-- or honor-- who *leeches* off of life, *exploits* life, *perverts* life-- and who enjoys sexually manipulating men for money.

And you're so proud of yourself for feeling *ANY* sense of power over others, that you're too stupid, and drunk, with evil, sleazy, control freak madness, to realize that you're publicly degrading yourself-- for the scum of the earth. And sad, lonely losers. Who *ALSO* probably fantasize about murdering you in their beds. Or skunky back alley somewhere."

Brook opens her mouth to debate, but Shy cuts her off.

"Oh-- and spare me the "pretty woman" fantasy, of "the ho with the heart of gold". Because, *YES*, there are *countless* callow girls out there, in need of *actual* help, rescue, and therapy, who get *abused* by men, *preyed* upon by their environment, and *sold* into slavery and prostitution-- but *YOU ARE NOT ONE OF THEM*.

And the average ho-- WHO *CHOOSES* TO BE A HO-- is not an adorable sweetheart, who just needs a hug, like they say in movies and TV all the time. The average ho-- who's *NOT* an abuse victim-- and still *CHOOSES* to be a ho, is a calculated, self-serving, 2-faced, spoiled brat bitch, who would throw anyone under the bus-- if the price was right. Or steal any woman's man-- just to make herself feel like a *boss bitch*.

"So enough with all the politically correct, Hollywood pretense, *bull crap*, of trying to call the grass a cloud, and the sky the ground, to fit some bogus narrative. Just call a spade a spade, and tell the truth. --A ho is a ho, --and it's nothing to be proud of, admire, endorse, or encourage girls and boys-- to be. *Period*."

Sky regards Shy admiringly, with a contemplating nod, impressed, wanting to applaud her for speaking the honest words he wished mainstream society had the balls to say.

Brook stammers, discomposed by Shy's unexpectedly spot-on accuracy, and changes course, to manipulate sympathy from them.

“Well-- some of us don’t have rich parents, like you must have.”

“I looked you up, Brook. Your parents have money. And the reason they hate you, isn’t because they never wanted kids, or because they didn’t want you to marry a Black guy.

“It’s because you slept around with all of your Mommy and Daddy’s married business partners, and kept posting snapshots of yourself getting high at parties, and going down on guys, all over the internet, and everybody saw them.

“You basically humiliated your entire family, and ruined your family name. So you lied to your fiance, and told him that you and your family were estranged, so he wouldn’t find out who you really were.”

A surprised look of disgusted shock gradually takes over Skyler’s stunned face, as he looks at Shyanne, impressed by her data hacking skills, “Really?”

“--Really.” She confirms, still staring daggers into Brook, with an unexplained air of giddy taunt.

“Wow. OK--” Skyler looks off, nonplussed.

“People change.” Brook defends herself, “I don’t do that any more.”

“Yeah because they paid you not to. Be honest. That’s the only way you can REALLY afford a place like this. No stripping in the world could ever afford all this. Unless “stripping” is just your “code word” for actual, hard-core, full-time “prostitution”.

“Like how “alcoholism” is peoples’ “code word” for their actual, hard-core, full-time “crack and heroin addiction”. Your parents are paying you not to be a selfish, disgusting pratt. Aren’t they?”

Brook gulps and looks down, clearing her throat-- caught. Shy shakes her head, tittering to herself.

“I knew it.”

Skyler raises his eyebrows to himself at the unexpected T.M.I. moment-- and takes back control of the room, "OK. Wow. Um-- Well. Back on topic-- So we can solve your fiancé's murder. As I was saying, Brook-- how did you know Theresa?"

Brook throws Shy a murderous sideways glance, then suddenly lightens up for Skyler, boosting up her chest, and playing with her hair, with a lilting, breathy, baby voice, and flirty smile at him-- clearly use to coquettishly seducing other women's men away from them.

"Oh, I didn't, sweetie. Last I heard, her boyfriend, Abraham, was talking about asking her to marry him at graduation, on the phone. I dunno who he was talking to. But you remind me of him."

She touches his hand vampishly, and slides her finely french-manicured hands, up his muscular arm, as she eases out of her seat, and sits on the other side of Skyler-- who looks more amused by her foolish antics, than turned on by them.

Brook ogles Skyler, comparing him to Abraham, "Both Black. Both handsome. Both muscular--"

Shyanne yanks Brook's wrist off of almost laughing Skyler, "Both taken."

Skyler glances back at Shyanne, a bit surprised that she's taking any of this nonsense seriously-- but this only adds to his entertainment. So he just sits back and watches them, purely out of curiosity now.

And maybe--

--For a slight bit of ego stroking too.

Brook pouts at Skyler, pretending that Shyanne-- the girl who's suspending her wrist in midair-- isn't there.

"Aw. And we could have had so much fun too. I bet I'd do things for you that she'd never do." Brook talks in her phony phone sex voice.

Skyler smiles knowingly at her, "I know." He smiles at Shyanne, "That's why I chose *her*."

Suddenly, Shyanne loosens her grip on Brook's wrist and melts into Skyler's smile, softening her fight, and she smiles back at him, touched and heart-warmed by him. He gently takes the side of Shyanne's face, leans in, and kisses her softly on her lips. Then he pulls back, and smiles charmingly at her. Shyanne giggles girlishly, and falls into Sky's palm like putty in his hands.

Pissed off that her wicked shtick didn't work on Skyler, the way her vile tentacles apparently work on every other guy she meets, Brook yanks her wrist back from Shyanne, and folds her arms in powerless disgust, rolling her eyes at them both, before she returns back to her couch, across from them. She clears her throat, as they gaze lovingly into each other's eyes, and kicks the coffee table, snapping them out of their trance.

"Well if that's all the info you need, in order to find my fiance's killer-- the door out-- is *THAT* way." She nods at her foyer.

Skyler looks back at Brook, amused by her suddenly pissed off response.

But not more amused than Shyanne-- who apparently-- is in 7th heaven.

"Uh, no. We need more info, if we're gonna catch The Valentine Killer." Sky gets back down to business, "So you say you heard Abraham talking to someone about marrying Theresa at graduation, on the phone. Did he say anything else?"

Brook cuts her eyes at Shyanne, looks down, and thinks about it. Then she slowly, slightly grins, with the new idea that just popped into her head, and she eyes Skyler.

"I dunno. I suddenly can't remember anything. But if you give me your number-- I'll give you mine-- and I'll give you a call whenever anything-- *comes*-- to me."

Skyler stares at her, and just smirks into a laugh, as he shakes his head, in awed disbelief, at the ridiculous turn that this conversation has taken-- and at the tragically-- and apparently dangerously-- silly girl, in front of them, who might just be the key, to cracking the biggest case of a lifetime.

“Like hell you will.” Shyanne gullibly snaps at Brook, “Aright, look-- Cut the fat, toots. No one’s bitin’ your bait, so stop fishin’ for trouble, in other women’s lakes-- and just answer our friggin’ questions.”

“Like what?” Brook argues nastily at Shyanne, suddenly dropping her fake, breathy, hyper sexualized persona, to show her real one-- the shallow, selfish, snotty, mean girl-- “You haven’t asked me any questions other than the first one, you fat clueless prude-- and I answered it.”

“Hey--” Skyler protests to Brook, with a suddenly serious and steely stare, “Don’t do that. Or we will leave. An then you’ll never know what really happened to your fiance. Or who did it. To stop all this. So you can either live in danger, fear, and *REAL* cluelessness, for the rest of your life-- or you can play nice, here with us, today... --so we can help you. But we’re only gonna help you-- if you play nice.”

And without having to explain himself any further, Brook shuts up, “Aright, fine. What other questions do you want me to answer?”

Shyanne smiles, so proud of Skyler-- and also looking forward to taking this opportunity, to confront Brook’s problematic lack of forthrightness, “OK, well-- I have a question for you-- What do you know, that the cops don’t know, that we need to know, in order to wrap this bad boy up? Cause we got places to go, and people to see, and you are at the bottom of that list, sugartits.”

“Oh-- my God--” Sky hides his face in his hand, as Shy grins bright like a sunny, corny, TV Show host. Then Brook eyes Shy like she realizes something.

“Wait. Oh my God-- Shyanne? Are-- Are you that singing writing goofy girl, Shy Valentine? The one we couldn't get to kill herself or join us? Holy shit. You actually found where I live? Fudge, you're tall. You got like-- half a foot on me!” She gasps, suddenly scared, “Oh God-- You're-- The *Valentine Killer*?”

“No.” Skyler assures her.

“Yes.” Shyanne's the one telling fibs now. --*Or is she?* “What are you gonna do about it, you tiny, bitchy, debased, bottle blonde barracuda? Are you ready to pray to God *NOW*?”

Shy grins devilishly at her.

Brook SPRINGS off the couch like a circus acrobat--

And makes a mad dash for the front door--

--*SCREAMING*.

CHAPTER

[27]

MEET THE GODS OF THE UNIVERSE

Damn it, Shy--” Skyler moans, leaning back in his seat, and rubbing his face in frustration.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist, hahaha.” Shy grins at him.

Sky groans, hops off the couch, and runs after Brook, taking a shortcut, and blocks her exit through the front door, as she screams bloody murder, running hilariously around her house, to get away from him. Finally, he leaps, tackles her, and pins her to the ground.

“HEY! HEY! BROOK! LISTEN TO ME! SHE WAS JUST MESSING WITH YOU. SHY IS NOT THE VALENTINE KILLER. SHE JUST HATES YOU FOR TERRORIZING HER FOR A YEAR. AND FOR PROBABLY BEING ONE OF THE WORST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD. BUT WE WILL *NOT* HURT YOU--”

“Well. That’s debatable.” Shyanne smirks with a naughty simper.

“Shy--” Sky levels with her, “I can really appreciate your need to teach her a lesson, for what she and her evil cyber-bully gang did to you, all year. I’m all about that justice. But I really don’t wanna be here right now. For both *our* safety *and* my Dad’s. So I’d appreciate it if we act grown for a moment, and-- find out what she knows. So we can get the heck outta here. Freaking her out-- is not helping our cause.”

"It's helping mine, hahaha." Shy laughs maniacally.

"Shy-- seriously. I could get my Dad in so much trouble for-- ya know..." He nods at distracted Brook, to remind Shy of how they got Brook's info.

She realizes, huffs, nods, and tightens up, huffing off the couch, and marching over to Skyler and Brook. Then she crouches down on the side of Brook, looking down at her.

"Alright, Brook. Before we begin-- I just wanna know-- Did I scare the light of God back into you?"

"YES! YES! I'M SORRY! I'LL GO BACK TO CHURCH AND PRAY! I'M SO SORRY!" Brook screams out.

"Don't apologize to me, Devil Possession Barbie. Apologize to--"

"I'M SORRY GOD! I'M SORRY I WAS SUCH A MEAN PERSON WHO MADE PEOPLE KILL THEMSELVES FOR BELIEVING IN YOU!!" She shouts.

"A bit forced, but it'll have to do." Shy eyes her, shaking her head, "It's amazing how much people can care for their own lives-- but care so little for anyone else's. Isn't it?" She eyes curious Sky for a beat, then Brook, "You're safe, Brook. We're not the bad guys. But we *can* catch them-- and save you. --Just tell us what you know."

Brook nods, fully submitting to their inquisition now, and Skyler lets her sit up, to talk, "The Valentine Killer doesn't want to kill *me*. The Valentine Killer wants to kill everyone I *love*. Just as she did with Sir Arthur George's son. They're rich. Untouchable.

"But somehow-- VK took their only son, murdered him, and dumped him in the dumpster of a homeless shelter. Use to be only every month, she'd kill somebody 1 of our 3 groups' members cared deeply about. Since Core 4, she's killed every week. So Club membership's plummeted all month."

Skyler glares at her coldly, "Aw, you poor thing."

Brook scoffs, "Chah-- I thought you were on *my* side?"

"We're on the *victim's* side." Sky corrects her, "Good people shouldn't have to die, just cause you're unfathomably evil."

"You don't know me! Or Jaleel!" She protests. "Jaleel was the only person I've ever loved in my entire life. He made me a better person. Or at least he made me want to be. And I know I didn't deserve him. And yeah, maybe I've wasted my life on, being a shitty person, for shallow reasons-- but I know a good thing when I see it. And Jaleel being born was the best day of MY life."

Brook looks down, for the first time, with any hint of remorse, regret, guilt, shame, or despair-- and her voice becomes soft, with genuine contrition. "He was the only combination that ever unlocked my heart." She mumbles painfully to herself, drifting away in tearful thought-- and deep loss.

"When Jaleel asked you to marry him, did he know you were in such a vile group of savage creeps?" Shy watches her.

Brook looks down, in guilty silence.

"Right." Shy eyes her, "So he died without ever even knowing why. All because of you. A million ways to kill a beautiful Black guy. We should just call "VK", and tell her that *you're* the most loved by all these psycho monster cults. So she'll target YOU next."

"Won't matter." Brook shrugs, "She knows everything we do, say, think, feel. VK knows."

"Alright--" Skyler's getting exasperated, "Who is Wealth Is God?"

"It's a sex slavery ring. And labor slavery. Human slave trafficking syndicate, among the untouchables." She admits.

"The untouchables?" Shyanne looks curious.

"The rich people. Wealthy, powerful. Untouchable. That dead guy, Sir Benedict George, was the beloved and only child of one of their members."

Shyanne thinks, and realizes, “So then-- if your group got hit last week, and their group got hit this week then--”

“Whites Are God gets hit next week.” Sky realizes, as he finishes her thought, “Who are the Whites Are God ring?”

“I can’t, I-- I need their protection-- from the killer-- for my family.”

Shyanne stares into her darkly, “You’re gonna need their protection from me, for YOU, in a second-- if you don’t tell us the truth, and be a decent person, for once in your soulless life. --Now *WHO* is Whites Are God?”

Brook is silent.

Skyler dials up the pressure, “Brook-- Who are they?”

Brook is silent.

Shy and Sky both snap at her, together, in unison, “WHO IS WHITES ARE GOD, BROOK?!”

Finally, Brook caves, “THE POLICE! OK? THE POLICE! MOSTLY--” She starts to cry, defeated.

And for a moment, Shyanne almost believes her tears are real. Sky knows her tears are real-- but he doesn’t care. Because he knows they’re only for herself. Not for her victims. Or for any other victims. Or for any higher purpose. She’s one of the villains. And in Skyler’s opinion--

Villains don’t have the right to cry.

Not for themselves.

That right belongs exclusively to their victims.

--and to the heroes who fought back.

“Cops are the Whites Are God cult.” She sniffs, knowing she could die for spilling this info to anyone, “Not all of them. But a lot of them. More than you think. They’re the secret group of White supremacists in our Gods of The Universe Trinity.”

Sky and Shy trade worried looks.

“Trinity?” Shyanne looks baffled, “Holy crap, yall work hard at building entire imaginary-- yet bulletproof-- worlds around your psychotic egos. Can you imagine all the GOOD you could do, and WRONGS you could right, with all that energy, focus and drive-- if you just-- STOPPED trying to be GOD? What a waste. I mean, who CHOOSES to be a super-villain over a superhero? What, were you all born morally retarded? You can build whole worlds, but on your life-- you just can’t find a soul?”

Brook shrugs, “Some people would rather be Hitler than Jesus, I guess. We can’t all be heroes. And who has time for the heroes to finally show up any way?”

“Wow. That’s messed up.” Skyler looks down, shaking his head at it all, “OK Brook-- I know what your “We Are God” cult does each day. You *terrorize* people to death, for ideology. And I can imagine what the “Wealth Is God” cult does each day. They *enslave* people to death, for money. But what exactly-- do these-- gun-toting “Whites Are God” racists of the law-- do every day, as part of their regular race-hating regime?”

Brook gulps as they glare at her with palpable contempt.

Shy and Sky sit with Brook at her beige marble kitchen bar counter, as she scans through videos on her laptop.

“We have videos on every member, so everyone keeps their mouths shut, for fear of getting exposed. The other 2 groups have videos on us too. You should also see the Wealth Is God Pride Reel. So you know who you’re dealing with. Cops are dangerous in more of a ground level, hand to hand combat way. The rich are dangerous in a more intricate, high-level, secret way. They own the cops. They can get the cops to plant fake evidence and everything.”

“Pride reel?” Shyanne looks at her.

“Oh-- Yeah.” Brook realizes they have no idea what she’s talking about, “The clubs call their montage films of bad behavior, *Pride Reels*. ”

“That’s sick.” Skyler looks genuinely sickened by it.

“Well ours isn’t actually the worst.”

Skyler cuts his eyes at her, “You bully people into killing themselves.”

“For believing in God.” Shyanne adds.

“Bad. We’re bad people. I get it.” Brook nods, rather receptively, to such a dark charge, “But *nothing*’s as bad as these guys.”

Brook plays The Gods of The Universe Trinity Pride video. Men in hooded, white robes, and gold God rings, like Homeless Mr. Callahan described, enter into a big circle of red candles, lined around the floor, chanting:

“We are the gods of the universe. They will bow at our feet. We are the gods of the universe. They are the weakest of weak. We are the gods of the universe. The masters that they serve and need. We are the gods of the universe. They are our dinner-- to eat.”

Shyanne makes a face, grossed out-- and creeped out, “That is-- REALLY creepy...”

“Well-- There’s a lot more...” Brook nods at the screen.

Creepy music plays, and Skyler and Shyanne cringe, as they watch video clip after clip of the “Wealth Is God” cult’s rich men and women, running labor and sex slavery and child porn rings, as “Whites Are God” cops host meetings... --and laugh into the camera, and they hunt down and murder men, women and children of color, planting false evidence on some, while they’re being forced on the ground, stripped, and publicly humiliated.

Officer Slager points to a board on the wall that reads, “RAPE DAY!” They all APPLAUD AND CHEER, excited.

The next clip shows cops hunting down, and raping women and children of color, or who wear Jewish and other ethnic or religious garb. They give an insane thumbs up into the camera, with a big grin, like they're at a fun, family theme park. In between are clips of "We Are God" shouting at people til they kill themselves.

At Trinity H.Q., they lay their dead, from adults to kids, in a Garden of The Dead. Then the video Pride Reel Commercial ends, and the words, "Gods of The Universe" display, like a badge of honor, to end it.

Sky and Shy stare back at the screen, beyond horrified. Shyanne goes over to the sink and pukes. Skyler just stares downward, dazed, as his fingers absentmindedly reach for his Cross key chain, by his pocket, but then he stops, and glances down again, remembering that it's not there.

So he just rubs his face and head, burdened heavily, "So... --The "Whites Are God" cult... is basically a pack of serial killers, rapists, sadists, and general, overall abusers of community-trusted power, who *tyrannize* people to death, for fun-- and hide behind the law, using their badge to get away with it".

"Yeah." Brook gulps, "And-- at Trinity Headquarters, they lay their dead, of adults and kids, who couldn't take their brutal rituals, in a Pink Rose Garden of The Dead, to be burned in a furnace, once they eat and finish other cult rituals. The 3 groups use to be separate. Then when group leaders started tracking their victims to the same survivor support group, they saw what they had in common and joined forces.

"In white robes, gold rings that had data chips in them, and masked parties, where they do bad things like a demonic frat. Calling themselves The Gods of The Universe Trinity. Mocking Christianity. Calling Wealth Is God: The Father; Whites are God: The Son, and We Are God: The Holy Ghost, in jest.

“I had no idea how bad it was when I came in. I just wanted them to stop terrorizing me. So I joined. Didn’t know they did-- all this. That they-- even go to places like Saint Valentine Orphanage, and pluck kids of every color and creed out, to adopt and abuse, and train to pick up the mantle and carry on the club name.

“Every pervert wants a pure, innocent child, who they can corrupt, reprogram, and brainwash, to blindly embrace their sick perversion. So every 5 years, they grab more kids to brainwash. And make them the more diabolical version of themselves.

“They teach them hacking, identity theft, electronic funds transfer. They teach them how to play with audio data. Trick dial phones. Block, intercept, and redirect calls. Text messages. Emails. They train them to always be listening to other people’s conversations. They train them to be athletically excellent too. Like in running and swimming.

“And they train them to be leaders, not followers. But most importantly-- to protect the fraternity at all times, no matter what. Though there have been some kids who successfully ran away, and were never found. But most don’t. Most break. Early.

“And whenever the kids defy them, they don’t punish them first. They manipulate them, and play hurt, like they’re weak, pretending they do it cause the world bullies *THEM*. So *you’re* the bad guy. Not the other way around.

“They’re good at making you think that YOU’RE the guilty party. They are the masters of playing the victim, when really-- they’re the villain. And they have so much in resources. They give gold bars to their kids every year as birthday gifts-- Pure gold.”

Skyler finally realizes it, slowly-- and darkly, “--The Valentine Killer...

--is one of their kids.

CHAPTER

[28]

MEET PROOF

The Valentine Killer-- is one of their kids who didn't take to their brainwashing program too well." Skyler calculates, "One of their kids who went off the rails. Rogue. With a stubborn moral compass they were able to break-- but not erase."

Shy thinks about it, "Financially poor Black believer?"

Brook snorts, "Blacks aren't serial killers. Even I know that."

Skyler shrugs, "Anyone can be a serial killer-- if they have a compulsion to kill. Regardless of the trigger factors. And any kid raised by these psychopaths could grow up to be a serial killer. Easily.

"In fact, I'm surprised there's not more people who jumped off the deep end like this. This-- this is only the beginning-- of mangled souls, manufactured by this cult of-- perverts, supremacists, and sociopaths. We just discovered a psycho factory."

Shyanne looks at Brook, "Which group found out about Core 4? About Abe spying on We Are God, and Mary spying on Wealth Is God, and Nelson spying on Whites Are God?"

--All of them." Brook shrugs, "Any time it was their turn to make a Squeal Reel-- they chickened out. Either they purposely messed up, or found an excuse to get out of it."

Skyler eyes Brook quizzically, "Squeal Reel?"

"Yeah." Brook explains rather matter-of-factly, "Not pride reel commercials like I showed you. Just blackmail videos, to keep you from squealing on the group. Your Core 4 friends always found a way out, til it got leaders suspicious.

"So I guess they bugged and tracked them. That's how they found Theresa. When they overheard the other 3 tell her they wanted out of their clubs and wanted her out of a dangerous one that she was in too."

Skyler perks up, "What other dangerous group?"

"There's a 4th cult?" Shy can't believe it.

Brook shakes her head, "More of a club to help victims, of-- us. -- Bullying Extremism Support Team. I heard Abe tell Theresa he didn't like the danger she was in. To be careful with someone named, "P. Roof". In quotations. As if he didn't believe it was a real name."

Suddenly-- Skyler realizes, "Bullying Extremism Support Team-- That's what BEST is. So it's *not* a money scam, Shy. Theresa just didn't want you to go cause she thought it was dangerous. Brook-- was it-- dangerous?"

Brook shrugs, "I guess. She's dead isn't she?"

Skyler and Shyanne glare daggers at her.

"OK, OK. Sorry. I dunno." Brook looks like she genuinely doesn't know, "But-- Abraham was talking about asking Theresa to marry him at graduation. I heard him say something on the phone about being afraid "P. Roof" was in love with her. And wouldn't take it well finding out about them, cause Roof was obsessed with Theresa, and clung to her, soon as she defended him from cyber bullies. Like Roof fell in love with her ever since. Got very possessive over her. Also referred to himself as-- a monster."

"So P. Roof is a guy." Skyler decides.

Brook leers at him lasciviously, “Or a girl. Maybe a secret lesbian obsession?” Brook starts to seductively sweep the fluffy curly hair out of distracted Shyanne’s face, “Hello Pretty Girl--”

Shyanne quickly smacks her hand away, and yanks a butcher knife out of Brook’s knife rack, pulling away from her, with a funny look of profoundly annoyed, affronted, and seething disgust, as she holds the knife to Brook’s neck, “Wench-- I will cut you.”

Brook instantly stops, and raises her hands up, in white flag concession, “Oh my God, fine, whatever. Damn goody-goody. It was just a joke. God, they still make you good girls? I thought your brand got discontinued.”

She lifts her eyebrows and rolls her eyes, as if she’s so socially jaded, morally numbed, and mentally brainwashed, by amorality and godlessness, that it genuinely surprises her, that another member of her own gender, might actually find her sleazy come-on, offensive and repulsive.

“No it wasn’t. You figured you couldn’t sexually control Skyler-- because he’s smarter than you. So now you’re trying your sick, manipulative bull crap on me. Cause you’re a creepy, sleazy, calculated, narcissistic, sociopathic, control freak. And the fact you can’t control anybody in this room-- like, *totally*, blows your mind.

“But you better keep that psychotic crap to yourself, chick. Because I’m smarter than you too. And unlike Sky-- I’m not opposed to putting you in the hospital. It would only be fair, after all. That’s what you and your cyber-bully gang did to so many others, right? And you got away with it, with them-- the same way I’ll get away with it, with you. Because, no one can say it was me-- because, there will be no proof.”

Her eyes and voice are eerily calm, confident-- and ice cold. Skyler notices this, a bit dumbfounded by Shyanne’s uncharacteristic behavior, all of the sudden.

Or was it uncharacteristic?

After all, how well did he really know Shy?

What if holding knives to peoples' throats, with an eerily calm, confident, ice cold stare, is really who she is-- and the girl he thought she was-- is the imposter? The front? What if his first impulse with Shyanne was the right one? What if Shy Valentine-- --is The Valentine Killer?

Sky ponders these scary-heavy thoughts, as he watches Shy and Brook have an epic stare-down. Then Shyanne breaks the stare, with a sudden gasp, as if she just had a serious Eureka-light-bulb moment.

"Holy mack--" She thinks out loud, "That's it."

"What's it?" Skyler watches her carefully.

"P. Roof--" Shyanne deliberates, "I am Proof-- Oh my God. P. Roof-- is The Valentine Killer!"

Skyler's eyes widen in new realization, agreeing with her, as Brook, who's still staring at Shy, waits for her to lower the knife to the counter. Then Brook grabs the knife, sticks it back in her knife rack, and shoves the knife rack underneath her cabinet, with the pots and pans, by the stove.

Shy rolls her eyes at her, as Sky figures out the rest of the puzzle.

"So-- The Valentine Killer's been-- stalking the Gods of The Universe-- thru their victims? In a survivors club?" He thinks about it, "So Theresa found out who the killer is-- because-- they went to-- support group meetings together?"

Shyanne doesn't understand, "That's-- But-- If she knew who The killer was-- then-- why didn't she-- tell anyone?"

Sky shrugs, "Maybe she didn't know. That's why she stayed in so long. To figure out-- which member was the killer."

Shy nods, "Then when she figured it out-- It was too late. Wow. That's deep. OK. But-- So-- Wait. Like-- I don't get something...

“Why-- do the other 2 cults let you guys know so much, when none of the squeal reels they have on you really compare-- or could hold up in a court of law?”

Brook furrows her brow at her, confused, “Whadaya mean?”

“I mean... you’re bad people. And you could get arrested for harassment. But-- technically speaking-- you’re evil behavior is mostly protected under the freedom of speech law. So why do they trust you not to squeal on them? I mean, when-- exactly-- did they start letting you guys into their loop?”

Brook thinks for a beat, “When the Valentine Killings started. They realized we were one of them, when we got hit too.”

Skyler thinks, “So then... The Valentine Killer knew who you were-- *BEFORE* you joined the evil trinity. --*How?*”

Brook mulls it over quietly with them, “We were being vetted by Wealth Is God before The Valentine Killings started. Wealth wanted us to replace the eldest club, that they said was “too insane to remain in the trinity”.

“HUMPH!” Shyanne scoffs in disgust, “Who’s more insane than *THEM?* ”

“I dunno. They wouldn’t say. But Whites Are God didn’t know about us. Wealth Is God is who organized the new online-offline trinity.”

Sky nods, figuring it out, “So The Valentine Killer definitely isn’t an outsider-- or from the Whites Are God, or We Are God, race and religion cults. The Valentine Killer is an insider-- from the *Wealth Is God*-- sex cult. A close insider. Someone so close to the top, that they knew about your group before your group was even officially brought into the fold.”

He taps the side of his pocket rhythmically, wishing his Cross was still there.

Shyanne is still bothered by something, “Right, but that still doesn’t explain why they trust you so much. If I was bad, working with someone less bad, according to the law, even if I trusted them on the surface-- I would probably bug their house and watch them closely at all times.”

They all look at each other, alarmed-- and then they immediately look around, and start searching through items, from lamps, to remote controls, to jewelry, and so on.

Sky pulls up his Wire Detector App on his phone, hears a bunch of beeps, sees lit up red dots all over his screen, and follows one of the fast blinking red lights right to Brook’s cell phone, which lays on the counter in front of him, as his phone app beeps faster and faster, the closer he gets to it.

He picks up her phone, opens the back of it, finds a little red and black wire device inside it, and stops, paused in dark realization. He pulls it out, and holds it up for the girls to see.

“Uh-- Ladies. --I think we’re in trouble.”

They don’t see him, but outside of Brook’s house, a lean, cold-faced, man in his 30s, wearing baggy, green and brown, forest camouflage clothes, flashes a quick series of professional grade photos of them, on his camouflage camera, from a tree, far away, in Brook’s giant backyard. There’s a curly, dark green wire in his ear, as he talks into his cuff.

“They made us, sir. Do we go in now?”

The man in his ear wire speaks to him with no emotion or sentiment for human life in his voice, “Save Brook Bradley for the ritual. Take the rest out now. --Neatly.”

Inside Brook's kitchen, Skyler sees a lit-up, red dot, suddenly appear on Shyanne's forehead. He gasps and immediately LEAPS over, knocking her out of the way, as multiple hitmen SHOOT UP Brook Bradley's house.

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

The girls SCREAM, RUNNING, as Brook's windows, counters, appliances, walls, and cabinets CRASH AND BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG all around them.

Shrieking Brook ducks, and hides behind a counter, across from what looks like a basement door.

Sky grabs Shy's hand, and yanks her into him, behind a cement wall, as the kitchen explodes with gunfire behind her. He tries to think fast, of a way out for them, as a team of hard-faced-- and hard-bodied-- men, wearing all black, advance on the house, from outside of Brook's big backyard wall window, shooting *tranquilizer* darts at Brook--

--And automatic sniper rifle *bullets* at Shyanne and Skyler.

Shy squeals and jumps, in neurotic fear and fright, as bullets fly all around them. Afraid of making the wrong move, a deliberating Skyler hugs a shaking, panicked Shyanne to his chest, to keep her as safe as he can, as he looks around the house, wondering if they're lucky enough, to not have any armed hitmen, coming at them from Brook's front yard.

--*THAT* could be their way *out*.

BAM!

But as soon as the thought pops into his head-- he hears the front door slam open-- knocked down by more weaponized men in black.

THUMP!

THUMP!

THUMP!

THUMP!

THUMP!

He looks up and immediately hears footsteps running and thumping across the ceiling surface above them.

CRASH!

The windows on the side doors crash open, as the butt of a long, dark gray gun punches through each one.

The killers are in the back.

The killers are in the front.

The killers are on the sides.

The killers are on the roof.

And Skyler, Shyanne, and Brook, are trapped and drowning, in a sea of professional killers, who are recklessly shooting and exploding everything around them.

And suddenly Skyler realizes--

They have nowhere to go--

--*But down.*

CHAPTER

[29]

MEET THE HENCHMEN

As a few men in black, cautiously march through the front door, and a few others try and fail to open the side doors, Brook darts over to what looks like a basement door, that reveals a secret, hidden, little staircase alcove inside, which leads down to another secret, hidden door.

--Her safe room.

She opens it, as she continues screaming and crying, runs in, and SLAMS the door shut. The safe room lock-down countdown goes into effect for 30 seconds.

Skyler sees Brook run into the alcove door, and races over, dragging Shyanne, as they both duck bullets, and rush inside it, to follow Brook. They jump down the steps and BANG furiously on the safe room door, for Brook to let them in.

“BROOK! HEY! LET US IN!” Sky shouts, “OPEN THE DOOR, BROOK! LET US IN! HURRY UP AND OPEN THE DOOR!”

But inside, Brook just looks around the shiny, well-equipped, leisurely dwelling, SHAKING wildly-- until she sees angry Shy SCREAMING at her, on the black and white security monitor video screen and speaker, beside the door inside.

“BROOK BRADLEY, YOU OWE ME! YOU OWE JALEEL!
YOU OWE **EVERYBODY!** YOU WILL REPENT-- OR YOU
WILL *SURELY* BURN IN HELL FOR THIS! *AND*
WITHOUT OUR HELP-- THEY WILL KILL YOU BY THE END
OF THE DAY! SO PROVE TO GOD, YOURSELF, AND YOUR
FAMILY, THAT YOU REALLY ARE A GOOD PERSON,
SOMEWHERE DEEP, DEEP-- DEEP DEEP DEEP DEEP DEEP--
DOWN INSIDE YOU-- **AND YOU LET US IN YOU SELFISH
MISERABLE COWARD!**”

Brook whimpers in freaked out madness, thinks for a second, and then, finally opens the safe room door-- but doesn't see Sky or Shy. So she steps out of the safe room, creeps up the little steps, opens the kitchen door, and slowly peeks her head outside of it. Seeing no one, she steps out, back into the silent kitchen, to see if everyone's gone.

Suddenly, Shy and Sky *jump* out of hiding, from behind a counter, and RUSH the door. A hitman targets Bradley, from far away, in a tree outside-- and SHOOTS tranquilizer darts at her-- but hits both Brook and Shy, who both COLLAPSE, knocked out, on the kitchen floor.

Sky grabs Shyanne, swings her over his shoulder, and HURRIES her into the staircase alcove. He reaches back for Brook, but bullets shoot all around him, as men BREAK into Brook's side doors and back door, and emerge from the front of her home, to swarm him.

It was a trick.

They never left.

They were just waiting for Brook to leave her safe room, so they could jump back out, ambush them all, and dispose of her-- *properly*.

Skyler hears the safe room lock-down countdown fall to 5 seconds. So he slams the kitchen door shut, races Shyanne down the steps, leaps into the safe room, SHUTS the heavy, metal, bank-vault-like, safe room door-- and LOCKS it, as armed men crash into the staircase alcove, and try to stop the safe room door vault from closing.

Sky lies Shy down to sleep, on a bed made up with black linens, and stops, to breathe a well-deserved breath of relief, before he turns to fully look around at the spotless room. There's a kitchen, a bathroom, a pantry, an entertainment center, and a workout area. Slowly, Sky realizes--

“This isn't a safe room--

--It's an underground bunker.

--To survive the apocalypse.”

Sky's about to take the full tour of the little underground house within a house, when suddenly, he gets another flashback from his past--

--and he BLACKS OUT.

CHAPTER [30] MEET WHITES ARE GOD

Skyler's back on that desolate road--

--Back in that cluttered trunk.

--Back at that tender age--

--Back at 6-years-old.

Little Skyler watched through the key hole in the trunk of his Dad's old black and neon orange race car, as Officer Pantaleo looked away from the trunk, and squatted down over his screaming, struggling Mom, pushing her down. All he could see was Pantaleo's legs atop what looked like his Mother's. But little Sky could only see their legs below the knees.

Was that strange man on top of his Mom?

Why?

What was he doing?

Skyler didn't understand.

He simply cried because he heard his Mother crying. Otherwise, all he could process was that this man, who was making his Mother scream and cry hysterically, just made his brother stop moving.

Was his brother sleeping?

And then little Skyler heard his Mother's screams become silent sobs, as Pantaleo jerked his legs forward and backward atop hers, while shouting at her.

The officer snarled viciously at her, *"I'M YOUR GOD! I'M YOUR GOD! YOU CALL ME YOUR GOD! CALL ME GOD! WHAT'S MY NAME?!"*

But Sky's Mom just cried.

"WHO'S YOUR GOD?? WHO'S YOUR GOD??!!"

There was no answer, only sobs.

Then Pantaleo did something that made his Mother scream in pain. Crying, confused, little Sky stretched his neck and position to see, but he couldn't.

"WHO'S YOUR GOD?"

Finally, Skyler's Mom screamed insanely at them, *"YOU ARE NOT GOD! YOU WILL NEVER BE GOD! ONLY GOD IS GOD! MY LORD JESUS IS GOD! AND MY GOD WILL COMFORT ME IN HEAVEN AS HE SENDS YOU ALL STRAIGHT TO HELL!"*

The other killer cops, who stood around, watching the monstrously evil atrocity take place, simply laughed, shaking their heads at her words-- some even video taping the crime, to watch later.

Pantaleo sneered wickedly at her, *"Oh no. There's nothing in the sky that cares about you. Nothing in this world that can save you from me. I'M YOUR GOD! I'M-- YOUR-- GOD! YOU CALL ME BY MY PROPER NAME AND I'LL LET YOU GO-- NOW WHAT'S MY NAME? WHO AM I? WHO AM I!"*

Suddenly she screamed the same words over and over, *"RAPIST! COWARD! MURDERER! YOU'RE THE DEVIL'S BITCH! RAPIST! COWARD! MURDERER! YOU'RE THE DEVIL'S BITCH!"*

The psychotic cops suddenly stopped laughing, getting pissed instead, and they started kicking her, to shut her up.

But she wouldn't shut up.

"RAPIST! COWARD! MURDERER! YOU'RE THE DEVIL'S BITCH! RAPIST! COWARD! MURDERER! YOU'RE THE DEVIL'S BITCH!" She screamed over and over and over again.

Finally, Pantaleo got fed up with hearing the truth, pulled out his gun-- and shot her--

--*Dead.*

Sky jumped with a gasp, hearing the loud, angry POPPING sound again, and hit his head on the roof of the trunk. He was already tasting the blood, from nervously biting the inside of his mouth. Now his head felt a sharp, jutting pain-- and all he heard outside of the trunk was--

--*silence.*

"Black lives *DON'T* matter." Pantaleo spat on Skyler's Mother.

But Skyler couldn't see that part either. He heard it. But he couldn't see it. All he could see, was a few cops applauding their own depraved savagery.

And now his Mother wasn't moving any more either.

So confused little Sky eyed the scene through his key hole, shaking wildly in fear, and watched as Pantaleo got up, and buckled his pants.

What's he doing to his pants?

Pantaleo looked over at a cop car, as he fixed his pants, and nodded at whoever was inside it, to come on out. A different officer-- A 21-year-old man, who was new behind the eyes, with dark hair and pale hue, the same as Pantaleo, but with a rounder face, and a lankier frame, nervously and fearfully got out of his cop car, with a red, watery face, and cowered over to Pantaleo obediently, looking shocked, nauseated, and scared crapless.

Skyler couldn't tell if he was shaking, but the fear in his eyes was unmistakable. Pantaleo nodded casually at Sky's trunk, ignoring the man's clear anxiety and trepidation, as if it was nothing but a phase, that would soon pass.

--And like he'd been through this before, with other newbies.

"Thomas-- Check the trunk. I think I heard somethin' in there."

Skyler watched Pantaleo hand young Officer Thomas his Mother's car keys. Then Thomas nodded, turned, and started heading toward the trunk. Sky gasped at this, pulling back from the keyhole, as a pudgy, pasty, fair-haired cop, Officer Loehman, jumped over to Pantaleo, waving a walkie talkie in front of him.

"SHIT. HEY-- PANTALEO! PANTALEO-- OFFICER BOB'S COMIN THIS WAY!"

"Yeah, Loehman-- So what?" Pantaleo just rolled his eyes at the roly-poly man's worry of getting caught by their own peers, while he finished fixing his pants-- as if use to it-- like this was their routine.

But Loehman wasn't about to get dismissed as just paranoid this time, as he nearly shouted, "HE'S SUBBIN' FROM ANOTHER COUNTY. FOR OUR GUY, ZIMMERMAN. HE AINT ONE OF US."

Pantaleo suddenly stopped looking cool, and looked around in thought, as Officer Thomas tried a different key to pop the trunk, because the first key was the house key.

Was it nerves that made it so hard for Officer Thomas to tell the difference between a house key and a car key?

Pantaleo cursed, "Damn. Aright, clean her up and throw her over there in that ditch, with her kid. Hurry up. We gotta get outta here. Make it look like a robbery. No-- A drug deal gone bad. Like they're just ghetto trash. People round here don't know any niggers. They'll believe whatever ghetto nigger TV bull shit we feed them."

Sky gulped, holding onto the inside strap on the trunk, as Officer Thomas tried to open the trunk, with the car key for the ignition.

Officer Loehman eyed a photo inside the wallet from Mrs. Stone's purse, "Shit, captain--" His voice was awed and wispy, like he suddenly realized that they just crossed a line or barrier that they had never crossed before-- one that they all knew not to cross. "The woman and her kid-- They were telling the truth. They're the wife and son of another cop in another precinct. --And he's decorated."

Officer Thomas tried the right key this time-- and the trunk unlocked-- but Skyler kept the door closed, from the inside. Thomas started to open it slightly, but Sky pulled it back down, making it look like the trunk was stuck or snagged on something, or broken. Thomas just huffed at it and walked back over to the other cops, disinterested in the trunk.

"What? Lemme see that--" Pantaleo snatched the wallet out of Loehman's hand, and studied it very carefully. Sure enough, it was a photo of little Skyler, his Mom, his big brother, and his Dad, who was in uniform-- and decorated. "FUCK!"

Officer Thomas looked at the photo and gasped, realizing, "Whada we do?"

Pantaleo smacked the wallet into Thomas's chest, like it was his problem now, "Call the new head of The Trinity-- Mike Slager. He's joinin' the force soon, and his Dad's the sergeant. They'll make this go away for us."

Thomas began to freak out more openly now, but only for himself and his own family, "Oh God, I can't lose my pension. I got a new baby girl on the way and my wife has--"

Pantaleo snapped at him, annoyed, "THOMAS-- HOLD YOUR SHIT TOGETHER. I WILL JUST GET ON THE DAMN PHONE, CALL SLAGER, AND HE WILL FIX THIS. NOW YOU AND LOEHMAN PUSH THIS CAR OFF INTO THE BUSHES SO BOB DON'T SEE IT.

"And don't turn the car on. These type cars have some kinda usage recording mechanism. Won't match the time of deaths. So just make it look like they crashed into a tree cause they were high. And then they called their drug dealer. And it went bad or something. I dunno, Slager will figure out a story for us, if that doesn't work."

Pantaleo pulled his phone out and started to dial Slager's number, as Thomas looked at Loehman, looked down, then went over to the car, got into the driver's seat, and put it in neutral.

Sky tried to close the trunk completely, but the long, skinny, metal top of an umbrella that was leaned against the trunk door, fell between the trunk door and trunk bottom, when Officer Thomas and little Skyler, were tug-of-warring with each other.

Now, it was too late to shut the trunk without anyone seeing him, as Loehman waved over the other cops, to help him push the car into a tree. So little Skyler just held the trunk closed, with a sliver of a crack in the door, letting the bright sunlight into his cramped quarters.

Thomas steered, as Loehman and the others started to push the car toward the bushes down below. Thomas stepped out, as the car started moving, and stood with the other cops, as it started to pick up speed. Accustomed to this sort of thing, the other cops turned, in bored disinterest, and trudged back up the hilly ditch, to join Pantaleo on the isolated road.

So neither Sky nor Officer Thomas knew exactly why he did it, but for some reason, Thomas-- the newbie-- turned to look back at the car.

Perhaps to make sure it hit its mark?

Perhaps just out of green curiosity?

But either way, as the car hit the tree that it was headed for, with a jerky BAM-- the power of that jerk backwards, made Skyler lose his grip--

--and the trunk popped all the way open.

--showcasing Skyler, awash in bright sunlight, and sprawled out amidst random car junk, with his arms spread out, trying desperately to hold onto something, to keep himself from bouncing around in the trunk. But then Sky realized that the car was no longer moving--

--and Officer Thomas was gaping directly into his 6-year-old eyes--

Both of them--

--*mortified*.

CHAPTER

[31]

MEET OFFICER THOMAS

Skyler gasped, with his black WWJD Bracelet now visible in the sunlight, and he quickly pulled the trunk back down, hiding under it, and hoping, perhaps naively, that somehow, even if all the bad men knew he was there, they wouldn't be able to get in-- as long as he held the trunk down, from the inside, hard and long enough.

--The invincible soul of unadulterated youth.

And perhaps it was seeing a child so young-- or perhaps-- it was seeing that an innocent soul actually *trembled in fear at the sight of him*, and *hid from him*, to *protect his life*, and mere *right to exist*, from him-- for the first time in Thomas's life-- that made him do it, but Officer Thomas automatically pressed his hand onto the gun in his holster, and turned quickly to look back at his uniformed peers.

What was he going to do?

Would he have shot them if they tried to kill the little kid too?

There were 5 of them and only 1 of him-- so he would surely get shot down dead if he took them on.

Or maybe he'd have just threatened to shoot them, found a way to get in the car without getting shot, and driven away, only to get taken out later by The Gods of The Universe Trinity's cover-up specialists.

After getting the kid to safety...

Sure, he might eventually die for doing it. But the kid would still be alive. And sacrificing your life to save another *is what heroes do*.

In fact-- *it was the job he was paid to do*.

But in truth, there was no thought. Officer Thomas merely acted on the impulsive reflex that he would have acted upon-- *if the child were his own*. There was usually something inherent in the majority of us all-- that felt instinctively protective over young children. Especially when they're right in front of you.

Not just on TV.

Or in the news.

As some *other, different* family's victimized tragedy.

And also-- there was still a part of Officer Thomas, that remembered actually signing up to join the force-- in order to be a hero, and do good work.

There was still that little boy inside of him, who wore a blue blanket tied around his neck, like a cape, with the red lightning socks on his feet, and that bright comic book superhero movie T-shirt, that his Mom bought him at the store --That little boy, who balled up his fists, on the sides of his waist, stood tall on his bed, like a hero, and jumped off --to fly down to somebody's rescue-- and save their day.

Was it an angel who whispered softly, into the listening ear of Skyler's Mom, telling her to dress Sky in a brand new yellow T-shirt, with the exact same superhero on it... --that Officer Thomas wore, on *his* eventually-worn-out yellow T-shirt, back when *he* was a little boy?

Clearly, the lucky coincidence wasn't lost on fate.

For even in profound tragedy-- there were profound little miracles-- orchestrated by The Divine. And apparently, Skyler's angels also kept Officer Thomas's police peers distracted-- nodding, talking, laughing, --and body-ditching, --up on the road, as Pantaleo talked to Slager on the phone, with a grim look on his face.

So, quickly calculating Officer Thomas took his hand off of his gun, then swiftly-- and discretely-- jogged over to the slightly crashed car, looked at the locked trunk, glanced back up at the road again, and saw-- again-- that everyone was still distracted, by socializing-- and corpse relocating.

He then took Mrs. Stone's car keys out of his pocket, and inconspicuously unlocked the trunk, making Skyler whimper in fear, as he suddenly realized that his 6-year-old arms, weren't anywhere near strong enough, to compete with the muscular, toned arms, of a hardback young adult in his prime.

But Thomas quickly threw the keys and wallet into the trunk, and shut the trunk again, locking it. Sky stopped shaking for a moment, looked in the direction of where Thomas threw the keys and his Mom's wallet, felt around for them, grabbed them, and held them close to his face-- in the little stream of sunlight, from the key hole, recognizing them-- even in the near-total darkness of the closed trunk.

Skyler felt the outline of the brand new-looking, big, hard, perfectly white-painted, wooden Cross, chained to his Mother's keys-- it was bigger than his hands-- and the smooth, leather covering, of her thick, black wallet-- it smelled like peppermint. He opened it, and a flat, silver-wrapped, peppermint gumstick fell out.

Officer Thomas started to walk back to the road up ahead. But then he stopped, turned back around and opened his mouth to speak to Sky. He paused, before anything could come out, and looked down, shaking slightly, in jittery, adrenalized, new instability-- unable to speak.

He was lost--

--in crippling guilty, and hopelessly ashamed thoughts.

But he knew he didn't have much time--

--So he found the words.

"I-- I'm sorry--" He croaked out, "They woulda killed my baby daughter Marybelle-- and my whole family if, --if I defended yours."

His voice quivered and cracked-- because he was telling the truth-- and the gruesome reality of the situation was really starting to hit him-- now becoming more real to him-- as he spoke to an innocent survivor, of his fellow lawmen's vile monstrosity.

He knew his words were not enough, and never would be. Because no words were adequate. Nothing he could ever say could ever make any of this right. His voice quaked because, deep down, he also knew-- --that this was not what he signed up for.

He didn't sign up to be a bully.

He didn't sign up to be a criminal.

He didn't sign up to be a psychopath.

He didn't sign up to be a supervillain.

But yet now, today-- here he was-- being all of those things. The exact opposite of everything he signed up to be.

The exact opposite of a hero.

He wasn't sure how to cope with that. So he was teeter-tottering, on the edge of an abrupt, nervous breakdown, 2 seconds away from snapping, and totally losing it-- and the only thing keeping him from suicidally ambushing his peers on the road, and going out in a fast, gunfire blaze of glory-- that would likely still leave most of *them* alive, to rewrite his history, and continue violating good people, as usual--

--was his little unborn daughter Marybelle.

--and his pregnant wife.

But how could he explain all of that, in 2 seconds, to a 6-year-old, who was *rightfully* convinced now, that he was a *monster*-- a *supervillain*-- a *scumbag*-- 1 of the *bad guys*--

--*The devil*.

"What are you doin?"

Officer Thomas jumped, startled by the voice of Pantaleo, who suddenly appeared behind him, eyeing him curiously.

Sky watched through the keyhole, as Thomas looked back at Pantaleo, then looked down timidly and morbidly, shaking his head, and started to trudge back up to the road.

“Nothin’. --I think --Bob’s almost here.”

Pantaleo watched Thomas as he plodded toward him, then he looked at the trunk, as if looking directly at Skyler, through the key hole. A thought occurred to him. He stopped Officer Thomas, as he started to pass by him, grabbing him by the upper arm, with one hand, and holding his other hand out to him.

“Where the keys?”

Thomas nodded at the woods in another direction, “I threw them in the bushes.”

“Well what the hell you do that for?”

Thomas shrugged, “Make it look more real. You said they’re supposed to be junkies, who crashed cause they were high. Junkies would lose their keys in the woods. Or are you changing the story now?” Thomas tried to look strongly into Pantaleo’s eyes, but Pantaleo could see the weakness in them.

He was a cowardly basketcase.

And Pantaleo knew it.

That’s why Pantaleo wasn’t worried about Officer Thomas. Because he knew Thomas was a pacifist--

--a passive villain.

But that also meant, Thomas could just as easily become--

--a passive *hero*, as well.

And Pantaleo had no love or patience for heroes.

“No. Story hasn’t changed. Same scenario.” Pantaleo eyed him dubiously.

“Good.” Thomas nodded at him, trying to look cool with all of this, but still looking stressed out by it, “Wouldn’t want any conflicts to mess anything up.”

He almost pulled it off, and passed the sniff test, if it wasn't for his red, glossy, darting eyes, --and that giant gulp he took, at the end of his statement. He was nervous. Not just because of what Pantaleo did. But because of something that *he* did.

And Pantaleo wanted to know what it was.

"Alright. Well the guys moved the bodies into the ditch already. Course, knowing Officer Bob, and his perfect Boy Scout attentiveness, he comes by here, 'n he'll probably see the blood stains on the road, stop to check it out, and immediately call it in. So we gotta head out now, and Slager's gonna see what he can do. You go on ahead, and take off, before he sees you. Ya know-- to protect your pension-- and little Marybelle?"

Officer Thomas shuddered nervously at the sound of his daughter's name coming out of Pantaleo's mouth. He cleared his throat, "And-- you? What are-- you doing?" He tried not to look back at the trunk. He wanted to feel like he at least did ONE thing decent and honorable today.

"Oh, I'm just gonna go check somethin' out right quick."

"What?" The word popped out of Thomas's mouth before he could stop it.

Pantaleo stared at him with a dark, eerie, half-smirk. Thomas's nosy interest just gave him away. He was supposed to say, "Kay. I'mana take off", then jog up the hill, get in his car, and leave. But Pantaleo caught him staring at the trunk of a car-- and now Thomas's body language suggested that he didn't really want Pantaleo to go down there.

So of course--

--he had to go down there.

"Just wanna check the trunk, Thomas. Ya got a problem with that?"

Pantaleo didn't even bother to glare at him. Thomas wasn't worth his anger. He was a wuss. So he just sneered at him with a challenging leer. Thomas gulped involuntarily again.

He really wasn't helping his cause right now.

--or Skyler's.

"But the keys are gone."

"Well that's alright." Pantaleo spoke in a psychotically loving voice, the kind of voice Mothers used when they were teaching their frustrated children how to tie their shoes, and were telling them not to be deterred by their little baby failure. "I've got a lock pick right here in my pocket-- right next to my pocket knife."

Pantaleo pulled out a lock pick and a switchblade from his pocket, and shook the blade out for him to see. Thomas stared at it nervously.

"Now you wouldn't have a problem, if I just go unlock that there trunk, pop the hood, and see what's inside, now would you, Officer Thomas?"

Officer Thomas gulped yet again, with weak eyes, as Pantaleo stared taunting daggers into him. Looking defeated, Officer Thomas dropped his eyes back down to the ground, and flinched his head, with a barely visible head-shake of compliance. Pantaleo smirked laughingly and knowingly at him, as if both entertained by his weakness-- and disgusted by it.

Then he glided away from Officer Thomas, and prowled toward his prey-- in the trunk of an old black and neon orange race car.

Officer Thomas looked up and saw that all the other officers had gotten in their cars. It was just him and Pantaleo who were still straggling about. A look of intense and dark, serious thought, shadowed across Thomas's face. He looked at the back of Pantaleo, and put his hand on the gun inside his holster again.

Maybe he wasn't the coward Pantaleo thought he was.

Little Skyler gasped and trembled in fear again-- shaking wildly-- as he saw the man who made his Mom and brother stop moving-- stroll toward him with sharp objects in his hands--

--and that evil half-grin on his face.

Pantaleo got to the trunk, put his lock pick in it, and started to jerk it around. As he started picking at the lock of Skyler's trunk, Officer Thomas pulled the gun out of his holster--
--And aimed it square at Pantaleo's head.

CHAPTER

[32]

MEET THE CONFRONTATION

Officer Thomas jumped at the sound of a police car screeching its tires on the road, as it took off down the street.

There were only 4 others now-- besides himself.

Pantaleo jerked the lock at 1 more angle-- and it popped unlocked.

Sky covered his mouth, to hush his gasp, as he rubbed the thick white wooden Cross, of his Mother's key chain, and rocked back and forth, with the car keys squeezed tight in his little hand. One sharp key poked out, between his little fingers, like a weapon for self-defense, as only 3 words consumed his mind--

God save me.

But the cosmos knew-- and maybe something in Little Skyler knew too-- that as soon as the bad man lifted the trunk hood-- Sky would have no time to successfully stab him with the keys and run. Pantaleo would simply lift his knife--

--and finish the job that he started with his brother and Mother.

Skyler didn't see it-- but as Pantaleo unlocked the trunk-- Officer Thomas curled his finger around the trigger of the gun he had pointed at Pantaleo's head-- pulling it in just a fraction-- only a breath away from sending a bullet right through his brain.

Another cop car pulled off.

Only 3 more bad cops Thomas had to deal with now.

Two, if you discounted the ended heartbeat of Pantaleo in a second.

Pantaleo positioned his hands on the trunk, to lift it, as Thomas positioned his finger on the trigger, to shoot him, when-- the distorted crackle of a familiar voice echoed on Pantaleo and Thomas's radios--

"Yeah, this is Officer Bob. I'm headed over that way now. I'll check it out."

It was Officer Bob's voice-- a *GOOD COP*, that stopped Pantaleo dead in his tracks--

--and perhaps saved Skyler's life.

Pantaleo stopped, hearing Bob's voice, and put his knife and lock picker on the hood of the trunk-- to grab his radio. As he listened carefully to the loud crackle of his radio, Skyler quietly and discretely, eased the barely open trunk closed again.

Pantaleo's knife and lock pick fell off the trunk and landed on his foot, lightly stabbing him. He jerked back and cursed, as he looked down. Then he saw his tools on the ground, and unconsciously slapped his hand on the trunk, to brace himself, as he bent over, to pick up his stuff. When he rose back up, he looked at the closed trunk, and realized that it was locked again. He would have to pick the lock all over again, in order to open it. And he didn't have time for that.

Officer Thomas figured that out too, and lowered his gun. But then he thought about it... --and he raised his gun again, to shoot Pantaleo, any way.

Until he heard 2 voices echoing from the road and speedily getting louder.

The other officers were coming.

Quickly, Thomas shoved his gun inside his holster, right as Pantaleo turned around to face him, and the last 2 cops came up behind Thomas, sandwiching him, in-between a travesty of law enforcement.

Pantaleo stopped abruptly, seeing him, just then realizing, that Thomas never left-- and his hand was just an inch too close to the gun in his holster. Pantaleo looked at Thomas's gun, then at Thomas, then he quickly whipped back around and looked at the trunk.

He pulled the gun out of his holster and aimed it at the trunk, about to shoot the trunk blindly. Officer Thomas gasped to himself, and lunged his hand for his gun, but missed, when the other 2 officers bumped into him, as they passed him, in a hurry, rushing over to Pantaleo.

This was it.

He could shoot all 3 of them, and only Pantaleo would see it coming.

Thomas grabbed his gun and pointed it at all 3 of them-- starting with Pantaleo-- just as Pantaleo curled his finger around the trigger of his gun, at Skyler.

"Pantaleo! What are ya doin', man? Bob's around the corner! He'll be here in like 2 seconds! He catches us here and calls it in, before we can stop him, we're all goin' up the river-- and none of us are gonna make it past day 1 in there."

"There's another kid in there." He lowered his gun slightly.

"What?" One of the 2 officers looked at the other one.

"We didn't get everyone in the car. There must be some type of trap door in the backseat, and the little bitch and her bigger boy, must have shoved him in there, when they saw us coming or something."

He started to lift his gun again, but one of the other cops put his hand on it and stopped him-- out of self-preservation-- not nobility.

"Pantaleo-- We checked the car and didn't see anyone else. If we shoot up the car, they'll match the shells to our guns-- and we're all getting life sentences."

"There was another kid." Pantaleo hadn't given up on finishing the job, "In the photo in the wallet. A little kid. He could be in there."

Thomas curled another fraction of his finger around his trigger, as the other cops debated with Pantaleo to get him out of there.

“What, the toddler? What’s a 2 or 3 year old gonna do or say, even if he is in there?”

“Was an old picture. The big boy was older. So the little one is too. Maybe like 4 or 5. Or 6 or 7. Seven year olds can talk.”

The radio crackled again with Officer Bob’s voice, “Somebody said they heard gun shots where? I’m on the road, but I don’t see-- Wait-- I think I see a couple cars way up ahead, a few miles down. Looks like we got some witnesses.”

Pantaleo and the other 2 officers gawked at each other-- then instantly turned, ran, and jetted back up to the road. Thomas lowered his weapon, losing his nerve to take them all on. The other 2 officers ran right past him, to get into their cars, not noticing the gun in his right hand. But Pantaleo saw it, and stopped for a moment, to snarl wickedly at Officer Thomas, behind the other fowl officers’ backs.

“Word to the wise, officer.” Pantaleo growled, “Guns are like peckers. Don’t pull it out, unless you gonna use it. And lets be honest-- you were never gonna pull that trigger. Cause you’re a punkass bitch. And that’s why we let you in. Cause a punkass bitch knows how to keep his punkass bitch mouth shut. So welcome to The WAG Club, Thomas. You’re 1 of us now.” He grabs him by the collar, and yanks his face into his, gritting his teeth, in fierce, threatening detestation at him, “Whether you like it-- *or not*.”

Officer Thomas bleated, looking down in defeat, with a tearfully screwed up face, as he started to fall apart, with a short, mournful squall-- weak in the knees.

Beyond irritated Pantaleo, caught Thomas, as he collapsed into his arms. Thomas impulsively lifted the gun to the temple of his own head, and tried to pull the trigger-- unable to face what they did.

“Hey! What the hell you think you doin’?!” Pantaleo grabbed the gun from an openly sobbing Officer Thomas’s hand.

Thomas-- had broken.

Furious with annoyance and resentment for Officer Thomas’s remainder of a conscience, Pantaleo just shoved Thomas forward, kicking him toward the road.

“Get up there, ya little pussy. You gonna get us all caught. Damn newbies. Go. Get in your car and get the hell outta here, before Bob gets here and you get us all put away. I aint goin’ to jail for you puss-pants. I’ll sooner shoot you in the got-damn face before I go to prison for your ass.

“Now get in the damn car and go, and if you still need to kill yourself, here--” He shoved the gun into his shaking hands, “You do it when you get home-- or on the freeway-- or at your church-- or at a strip club-- hell-- go to a kids playground for all I care-- just do it ANYWHERE BUT HERE. Now go. Your punkass bitch disease is drippin’ all over me. GO!”

He yelled at quivering Officer Thomas, as he got into his car. The other 2 officers had driven off already. Pantaleo started his car, looked off into the distance, and saw Officer Bob’s car rolling down the hilly woodsy road.

“Shit! He’s in view! Get the fuck out of here Thomas! Or I swear to God I’ll shoot you’re little daughter Marybelle in the head, while she’s still in her Momma’s womb, and you’ll never see them-- or the light of day-- ever again!”

Suddenly Thomas sobered up, as he whispered to himself, as if in a trance, “Marybelle. Right. Marybelle. I have to save Marybelle. I had to save Marybelle.”

“If you’re not gone by the time Bob pulls up-- your precious little Marybelle and wife? Are DEAD!”

Pantaleo sped off in the opposite direction of Bob, as Thomas started his car, chanting his daughter's name to himself, and he followed Pantaleo down the road.

CHAPTER

[33]

MEET OFFICER BOB

Officer Bob's car soared fast, down the barren road, with his bright red, white and blue lights flashing, and his loud, whirling siren blaring.

He wasn't sure which cars he was chasing down. He only knew that there were a cluster of what looked like cars, from far away, and then suddenly they all sped off-- like perps fleeing the scene of a crime. So he drove all over, searching for the cars-- any cars-- but he found none. Just a big soda distribution Mac truck, and a portable stable truck, full of horses.

Finally, he turned back, and slowly roamed down the road, around the area where he thought he saw the cluster of vehicles. Then he came across the pool of blood stains in the road, stopped the car and got out. He crouched over the dark red puddle, swiped it with his finger, and saw fresh red blood on his hand. He immediately pulled out his radio.

"Yeah, looks like we had some kind of confrontation out here on the road that got a little bloody, and then they all took off and fled the scene, to avoid getting a--"

He glanced over and saw the hint of a bright pink sun dress, poking out from below street level, in a grassy ditch, beneath a woodsy brush and shady oak tree branches.

He sprung up, raced over and stopped short with a wide-eyed gasp.
“Oh my God--”

He saw Skyler’s Mom and brother slumped in the dip, with bullets in their heads, and he quickly scrambled for his radio, “Send-- Send for backup! Nuh-- NOW! We got a murderer on the loose! It looks like-- It looks like an execution-- of a Mother and her son. --Probably a domestic spat went bad.”

There was blood all over their faces, and before Officer Bob could take a step toward them, he heard the muffled sounds of Sky trying to push his way back out of the trunk. The back seat, that Skyler crawled into the trunk from, wouldn’t open-- and the keys wouldn’t work from the inside.

Officer Bob jogged over to see if there was anyone living, who he could help, and saw Mr. Stone’s black and neon orange race car crashed into the tree. He stopped short, realizing he’d seen the car before. But he couldn’t place where.

So he rushed over and heard Skyler struggling to get out of the trunk. He ran back to his patrol car, grabbed a box of tools from his glove compartment, ran back to Skyler, and pulled a lock pick out of his tool kit. Sky heard him start picking the lock, and went silent, with another frightened gasp. In 6-year-old Skyler’s mind--

Another man in a police officer’s uniform meant--

--He was there to make Skyler stop moving.

--Just like they made his brother and Mother stop moving.

--*Where was his brother and Mommy?*

But Officer Bob didn’t know all this, and just plugged away at the lock, until he popped it open-- and lifted the luggage compartment hood. Skyler immediately jumped up, screaming, and flailed his arms at young, 19-year-old, Officer Bob, trying to swing his Mother’s keys and big, snowy, Christian Cross key chain at him, as her wallet bulged out of his tiny, 6-year-old, jeans shorts pocket.

Confused Officer Bob handled the youthful ambush quite easily, grabbing Skyler's wrists, and holding them behind his back, as he methodically bear-hugged Sky into submission.

"Alright, alright kid-- Calm down. Calm down. You're OK. You're OK. No one's gonna hurt you. You're safe. You're safe. Calm down." His voice was calm, but slightly frosty. Not out of personal malice. But rather, out of routine detachment.

Finally, crying, screaming Skyler slowly stopped trying to struggle out of Officer Bob's grip-- partly because he had no choice-- and partly because he said he was safe.

Officer Bob then looked at Skyler seriously, but still with the slight air of a dispassionate observer, "Do you know what happened here? Who locked you in here? Was it your Dad?"

Sky stared at him in confused shock and shook his head fiercely, "My Dad's out, patrolling a big famous football game far away, in a big stadium with lots of people. So he wasn't here to save us."

Bob looked confused, "Patrolling? Wait-- Save you from who?"

Skyler's eyes went wide with anxious fear, "The police."

Officer Bob chuckled a bit insensitively, considering the horrific circumstances, "Kid-- I *am* the police." He was proud to say it.

In fact, he'd always wanted to say that.

Ever since he was a little kid himself.

Skyler shook his head hard, "No-- The *BAD* police. Not like you and my Dad," he pointed to the caped, comic book movie superhero on his yellow T-shirt. "But like the supervillains."

Officer Bob furrowed his blonde brow, "Your Dad? Who's your Dad?" Then he saw the ebony wallet poking out of Skyler's pocket. He grabbed it, opened it, saw the photo of Sky's family-- and immediately-- he recognized Skyler's Father, with a choked catch in his breath, "*Officer Stone?* Officer Stone is-- your Dad?? He-- He *trained* me. He-- You--"

Officer Bob glanced over at the 2 dead bodies peeking out from the ditch, further away, and then turned and looked back at Skyler, with sudden emotion and hurt in his eyes, as he realized that this wasn't just some random drama, with some random people, that randomly got killed-- boohoo, life happens, too bad.

No.

Now Officer Bob realized, that those 2 randomly executed people in that ditch over there-- were important. --Because they were the wife and eldest son-- and namesake--- of his mentor.

Now he realized, that this horror scene, was personally connected to him, by way of someone who he actually knew, respected, and even admired.

Suddenly warmth filled his voice, and tears crescented his glossy eyes, as Sky and his dead Mother and dead brother became fully humanized for him.

Before-- he was just doing his job. But now-- he was intensely involved. Now he had to do more than just go through the motions.

Now he had to *care*.

And he did.

And after this event-- Skyler wasn't the only one who would never be the same.

Neither would Officer Bob.

Officer Bob looked painfully at Sky, "You must be Skyler. The little one-- he says is-- so much more different from him than your-- big brother-- Junior--" Stunned Officer Bob glanced foggily over at the ditch, with Skyler's Mom and big brother, as if suddenly lost in a daze, that he couldn't break out of.

Little Skyler gasped hopefully, "You know my brother? Where is he? Is he with Mommy? Where are they?"

Officer Bob turned slowly, to look at Sky, still gut-punched, and a bit disoriented, by the sickening reality of the situation, and he gulped.

“How many officers were there? The ones who ki--” He rethought his wording, “The ones who your Dad wasn’t here to save you from?”

“Six. But one of them said he was sorry, and that they woulda killed his baby daughter Marybelle, and his whole family, if he defended mine.”

Officer Bob closed his eyes in horrified, agonizing grief, and nodded knowingly to himself, realizing that Skyler was speaking horrible truths.

“Officer Thomas.”

Skyler nodded innocently, “Yeah. Him. He helped me stay hidden from the other bad guys, who were hurting my Mom and brother. Where’s Mommy? Sirius? Are they OK? Are we gonna be OK?”

Officer Bob looked down and away from Skyler, in morose reflection. “No.” His voice uttered softly, barely even there, “We’re not gonna be OK after this.”

He didn’t lie to Skyler, and Skyler didn’t totally realize what he meant, but Sky could sense that things were really bad. So he cried, in scared sadness. Officer Bob grabbed still-standing Skyler, and hugged him tight-- but *personally, and heartfelt*, this time-- as Sky stood inside the trunk, gripping tight, to his Mother’s thick white Cross.

Then crying little Skyler, caught a glimpse of his Mother’s bright pink sun dress, far away, in the ditch, and he gasped, feeling something leave him-- a profound loss-- of something that he wouldn’t be able to explain, until many years later--

--a wholeness.

--a happiness.

--an innocence.

--a peace.

--a faith in humanity.

Suddenly, all of that was replaced by something else--

--a darkness.

--a distrust.

--an emptiness.

--a barricade.

--a fear.

And eventually--

--an *anger*.

Sky's crying, dark, hazel eyes, stared off into the distance-- lost and traumatized-- as Officer Bob hugged him, and quietly hid the woebegone tears, slowly falling from his own light, aquamarine eyes.

Now Skyler hears water drip from a dirty white ceramic sink--

--a jingling bell ring above a glass door.

--a loud air conditioner blow through a vent, as a plastic red ribbon, that's tied to it, flutters in the air.

--He sees a hard, thin, jagged, dark gray, metal wire in his hands.

--He sees a Cross tattoo on an ivory ankle.

--Then he hears a teen girl scream hysterically for help.

--But Skyler can't see her.

--*Yet*.

All he knows-- somewhere in the back of his 16-year-old subconscious-- is that the voice of the screaming girl, who's begging for help, as someone attacks her-- sounds familiar. He's not completely sure who the frantically screaming teenage girl is... But he knows who she sounds like.

--She sounds like...

--*Laura*.

ACT III: PART 2 - THE SECRET ESCAPE

CHAPTER

[34]

MEET THE KEY-- TO EVERYTHING

16-year-old Skyler's eyes refocus, as scared Shyanne snaps her fingers in front of his face. The sound of her Cross charm bracelet dangles softly in his ears, as Derek Minor's rap song "Stranger" featuring Roz, plays from Shy's iPod, through the TV entertainment center speakers, in the background. She looks terrified, until she realizes, that he's finally snapping out of his daze, and coming back home to reality.

He looks at her blankly. All he registers, at first, is the obvious, sensual optics: The sweet scent of her vanilla perfume. Her pink, fitted, spaghetti string tank top. Her soft, loose, long, wide, eggshell white elephant pants. The sparkly silver shawl over her shoulders.

Her pearl necklace.

Her worried face.

Her awesome cleavage.

It takes him a moment, but he recognizes her, and he smiles, feeling warm, safe, and at home with her. He looks at himself, and sees that he's back in his long, loose, dark blue jeans, and slightly translucent, blue, buttoned down collar shirt, over a sleeveless, white, fitted, muscle shirt.

He feels the top of his head, where his dark-lensed, black and neon-orange motorcycle sunglasses still rest. Then he looks around, and realizes that he's back in Brook Bradley's house. Back in the safe room.

--And the whole room is now a violent mess.

"Wha-- what happened?" He eyes the place in secluded confusion, still slightly biting the inside of his mouth. Then he realizes--

Wait-- Why is he biting the inside of his mouth?

Shyanne huffs, relieved that he's back, and catches her breath, glancing downward, like he just saved her from having a severe panic attack. She's wearing her silvery-pink-rimmed glasses again. Apparently, she wanted to explore-- and understand-- every detail of their new environment, with meticulous eyesight, while Sky was... mentally unavailable. Rediscovering her composure, she gazes back at him, sincerely lost in mystery herself.

"I dunno, you tell me, daydream believer. When I woke up, the whole room was a war zone, and you were just standing there, next to my bed, looking all zoned out and trippy. But, hey-- Thanks for my blanket." She smiles warmly at him, holding up a soft, plush, crimson red comforter, and snuggling the side of her lovable face in it, like a baby.

"Blanket?" He realizes that he's tasting something metallic and drippy in his mouth.

"Yeah. The blanket you put over me." She smiles innocently at him, "Thanks."

"I-- I didn't-- put a blanket on you."

Blood, he realizes. It's the metallic tang of blood, that he's tasting the little drip of, in his mouth.

From biting himself.

Skyler looks back at Shyanne, very much confused. Because he very much doesn't remember putting a blanket on her. But he also feels the familiar memory of seeing her shiver, and hold herself, as she slept in a black bed-- and then the flash of him recklessly, and mindlessly, digging through red linens.

He looks around the room, until he sees the dresser drawer of a wardrobe sticking out, with red linens messily draping out of it, right above the floor. He looks down in profoundly unsettled thought, realizing--

--He *did* put that blanket over her.

--But he was *unconscious* when he did it.

Which only led him to the *next* question--

What *else* had he done while he was unconscious?

And *who* was that teenage girl, whose voice he kept hearing, scream for help in sheer terror, in the back of his mind? And how did he even know, so certainly, that she was a teenager-- if he couldn't see her?

Maybe he did see her--

--when he made her scream.

Was he the reason why his best friend's childhood crush went missing?

Did Skyler make Laura disappear?

Skyler is lost in his own dark, scary thoughts, absentmindedly rubbing the side pocket where his Mother's white, wooden Cross is supposed to be, as Shyanne simply shrugs, and holds up 2 long guns, disinterested in debating a trivial fact about a blanket, that she firmly knows to be true.

"Whatever. Look! Tranquilizer guns! Found them in the closet. I was playing with them while you were konked out, and I think I figured out how to use them-- Oh! And I checked the monitors. Looks like the hitman assassins are gone!"

Sky shakes off his troubled and worrisome thoughts, pulls out his phone, turns it on, presses a few buttons on it, and holds it up, as Shy starts moving toward the Safe Room door latch, to open the door. Suddenly, Skyler sees a bunch of warm bodied orange blurs, all over his visual map of Brook's property, on his smartphone screen.

"Well they must have hacked the security system, and tampered with the monitors to give us false visuals, cause the thermal heat signatures on The Life Detector App I built, indicate that this whole house, is crawling with hitmen, just waiting for us to come out, so they can murder us."

Shy freezes, pulling her hand back from the bank-vault-like door knob, just as the hitmen lie in wait, right behind it, poised to shoot her. She gasps, and turns to Skyler.

"What do we do?"

Skyler pulls up his wire detector program again, on his phone. The phone beeps, showing bugged wires everywhere. He puts his index finger to his lips, and shakes his head at her. She silences herself immediately, seeing this. Then he pulls the map back up on his phone, and sees the best thing that he's seen all day--

--an underground tunnel.

He looks around the room, until finally, he notices the crimson red rug, beneath the heavy, metal, black lined, king size bed, that Shyanne was sleeping on. He lifts the rug-- but the bed is too heavy to see what's under it. So he shouts loudly--

"GUESS WE'LL JUST HAVE TO PARTY THE NIGHT AWAY AND HAVE A GOOD TIME TOGETHER TILL THEY LEAVE."

Shy furrows her brow at him, confused. He shakes his head, puts an index finger to his lips, then goes over to the entertainment center, and turns on a loud rock song from Shyanne's iPod-- Fireflight's "For Those Who Wait". He blares it so loudly, that Shy covers her ears, and steps back from him, looking at him like he might, seriously, be crazy.

Even the hitmen, outside their door, yank the curly black wires out of their ears, in abrupt shock at the raucously deafening volume.

Back inside the bunker, Skyler goes over to the bed and starts pushing it forward. Completely baffled as to what Sky's doing, Shyanne reluctantly gives him the benefit of the doubt-- partly because she likes and admires him-- and partly because, well-- what other choice does she have? She slowly staggers toward him, stands beside him, and starts helping him push the bed away.

The rug moves with the bed, until finally, Sky and Shy move the entire bed and rug away from that area of the floor. Shy looks down and gasps, seeing the trap door, in the floor, that the bed and rug were covering.

He flashes her a sweetly valiant smile, as if to say, "See? I got you", and brushes his hand comfortingly across her back. She smiles admiringly at Skyler, both awed-- and relieved, as he crouches down to scrutinize the door.

Sky sees a lock on the door, with a key shaped outlet. He looks around the room, gets up, and starts going through dressers-- until finally-- he finds a couple shiny, thin, silver tools, strangely placed in Brook's thong underwear drawer.

One has a tiny flathead, like a micro-screwdriver. The other has a tiny Phillips head, with a cross-shaped slot for turning, like a micro-watch-opener. Calculating that these 2 objects have something to do with them getting out of there-- Skyler grabs them, goes back to the lock, and starts picking the lock on the door.

Shyanne looks leery at it, with a confused, uncertain expression. She wants to speak, but then she looks at the loud radio, the video monitor, and the vault door, and stops.

Then she sees her big pink tote bag on the couch, darts over to it, grabs it, digs her hand into it, grabs a marker pen and a pad, pulls the cap off her marker pen with her mouth, and starts writing furiously on her pad.

Befuddled Skyler is not making any progress on this lock, and he has no idea why. Until Shyanne scampers back over to him and shoves her notepad in his face. He backs up, startled by it, but then he reads it-- and it hits him, that she has a point, as he reads:

“Are you sure that’s really the right door? If I’m in a crazy killer cult, afraid of them and The Valentine Killer trying to open the trap door to my safe room, and at any second I could need to get away, and might get caught and searched, or body scanned-- I wouldn’t keep or carry a key as my only safeguard, cause that could get lost or stolen.

“I would use a lock that only I could open. Something I could keep on me at all times-- something that couldn’t get lost or stolen.

“I mean, I know Brook’s not the brightest bulb in the socket (ie “stripping is a respectable art”)... But she’s incredibly self-preserving, so keeping that in mind, I’m just saying, I would probably--”

Sky realizes that her long-winded note spills all the way over to the next page, and just sort of rambles on for a bit, humorously, so he just focuses on 2 lines from her wordy first page:

“I wouldn’t keep or carry a key as my only safeguard, cause that could get lost or stolen. I would use a lock that only I could open-- something I could keep on me, at all times-- something that couldn’t get lost or stolen.”

Like a combination lock, he thinks.

All of the sudden it hits him. He grabs the lock and feels around it, until he feels something on the back, turns it over and finds it-- a secret cover on the lock-- that looks and feels like it’s the back of the device. But there’s a slight opening along the edges-- if you look carefully. One that can only be wedged opened by a micro-flathead screwdriver--

--or one of the strange thin metal objects in his hands, that he found in Brook's Underground Underwear drawer. The uniquely flatheaded one that he was using to help him pick the fake lock on the other side of the device.

Skyler uses it to crank the secret lock cover open, and it reveals--

The flat, hidden, combination lock, that *actually* opens the mechanism in the device.

One that also requires a stylist pen-- or the other, thin, rounded, metal stick, that he found in Brook's drawer-- to rotate the cunning dial, which was marked with numbers, through a specific sequence-- and open the lock.

So the reason why the lock, on the front, wasn't unlocking, wasn't because Skyler was doing it wrong (maybe)-- but because that wasn't the front. That was the back. A trick decoy lock. This combination lock was actually the front.

Crap.

He could hack a device.

He couldn't hack Brook's mind.

Or maybe he didn't have to...

Skyler immediately tries various combinations of numerous number codes-- Brook's birthday, Brook's phone number, Brook's physical address numbers, Brook's IP address, Brook's name or email address, in number code.

Nothing works.

Then Shyanne writes more words down in her notebook, and puts her pad in his face again, with another written paper for him to read, as the song changes to Flyleaf's loud rock song "Beautiful Bride". This note has only a few words on it:

"08-01-01-- Jaleel's birthday. I checked because I wanted to know his sign-- (He's Leo-- She's Aries-- *So Typical*)".

Skyler thinks back to himself, and gets a flashback of Brook snapping at them in her livingroom--

“You don’t know me! Or Jaleel!” Brook protested. “Jaleel was the only person I’ve ever loved in my entire life. He made me a better person. Or at least he made me want to be.

“And I know I didn’t deserve him. And yeah, maybe I’ve wasted my life on, being a shitty person-- for shallow reasons-- but I know a good thing when I see it. And Jaleel being born was the best day of MY life.”

Brook looked down, for the first time, with any hint of remorse, regret, guilt, shame, or despair-- and her voice became soft, with genuine contrition. “He was the only combination that ever unlocked my heart.” She mumbled painfully to herself, drifting away in tearful thought-- and deep loss.

Shy’s right, Sky realizes. In fact, he kind of can’t believe he didn’t figure it out sooner. Or at all-- considering all the romance novels he’s read, to learn about what women want, and *sharpen his finesse*. What’s the key to unlocking any girl’s heart?

It’s love.

It’s always love.

And sometimes money.

And laughter.

But mostly love.

Love is the key.

So it’s Jaleel.

And it’s his birthday.

The best day of Brook’s life.

Skyler immediately keys Jaleel's birthday into the flat combination lock, with the thin, silver stylist, and--

--*CLICK*.

The metal half moon bar that's clasped around the latch on the trap door-- POPS open. Sky and Shy gasp with gleeful grins of delighted awe at each other. Sky quickly pulls the lock off the door, and yanks the trap door open, to reveal a latter escape, that leads down into a creepy tunnel of murky darkness-- and maybe some sinister surprises that await them.

Shyanne excitedly hugs Skyler, kissing his cheeks and lips kittenishly, which makes him blush and chuckle boyishly. Then she grabs her pink tote bag-- and the tranquilizer guns-- shoving them into her tote-- and she moves toward the opening in the floor-- but Sky stops her, gesturing for her to wait.

She freezes, staring at him in wide-eyed wonder and anxiously concerned curiosity. Skyler goes back over to the radio, picks up Brook's MP3 Player, looks through it, and laughs to himself, with a mischievous nod, when he scans the first few song titles, in a playlist titled, "Honeymoon".

He removes Shy's iPod from the center dock, instantly cutting her music off, replaces it with Brook's iPod, and plays the "honeymoon" playlist, loudly blasting Boyz 2 Men's song, "I'll Make Love To You".

Shyanne flits her head and hands at him questioningly, as he walks back over to her, and the sexy, slow, R&B ballad about lovemaking, blares loudly through the speakers all over the room. Sky doesn't answer Shy's confused face just yet.

He merely guides her into the giant square hole in the floor, and helps her down the tunnel steps, holding her hand like a gentleman, to brace her, as she starts climbing down the latter. Then he gets in, above her, and follows her down the latter, closing the floor door above them.

CHAPTER

[35]

MEET THE TUNNEL OF GHOSTLY SECRETS

As soon as they both climb down, onto the ground of the secret, musty-smelling tunnel, Shyanne slips on something wet, and grabs the dark tunnel wall to catch herself. Skyler jumps off the latter, and helps her, grabbing the wall beside her. The wall feels like it's made up of big round stones.

He pulls out his cell phone to give them a little blue light, revealing large, circular, primrose rocks, "Wow." He jumps, looking around, as he realizes that even his whisper reverberates a strange spectral echo, against the earthy cavern walls, and he quiets himself, speaking in a more hushed whisper to Shyanne, "Looks like a bunch of giant, smooth stones. So Brook even decorated her underground tunnel? Now *that's* wealth."

"Yeah. Gotta keep your dark, creepy, underground, apocalypse survival tunnel elegant. Ya never know what zombies, aliens, or terrorists you're gonna wanna show it off to one day." Shyanne rolls her eyes.

Skyler chuckles at her. Then Shyanne looks at him with a laughing expression of curious befuddlement.

"So what was that about up there?"

“What was *what* about up there?”

“With the radio. Your music change?”

“Oh--” Skyler laughs, “The best way to distract people away from seeing what you’re ACTUALLY doing, is to feed their prejudices, and trick them into thinking that you’re doing, whatever it is they *already* think you’re doing.

“So now, instead of wondering why we’re head-banging out to mosh-pit music for hours on end-- they can all lean back, relax, and keep their minds occupied, with their own x-rated fantasies, of all the hot, steamy, passionate, naughty, premarital sex that we’re NOT actually having up there.

“And by the time they realize that we been bumpin’ ‘n grindin’ for waaaaay too inhumanly-impossibly long-- we’ll have already found our way out of here-- and escaped back into our long-cherished freedom.”

The hitmen, outside of Brook’s safe room door, hear the sexy music, echoing out of their curly black wires, and they curiously put them back into their ears. Then they give each other knowing looks, and snicker with lascivious nods at each other. One of them even makes a funny sound with his mouth.

“Bow-chicka-wow-wow...”

The other hitmen laugh.

Skyler and Shyanne look at each other. Then they instantly crack up into a youthful flash of goofy giggles, at his excellent decoy plan. Then her laugh subsides and she gazes at him. Sky looks back at her, curiously, with slowly ceasing chuckles.

“What?”

She leans into him, and kisses him softly on the lips. Then she pulls back and looks at his suddenly mystified face.

“I think you just might be the one, Skyler Stone.”

He gazes back at her, curiously stunned and wanting more. She just smiles at him, with a flirty, yet sultry gaze.

“One day,” She nods, gazing at his lips, “it won’t just be a fantasy.”

His eyebrows fly sky high, in newly awakened curiosity, and surprised excitement, as she whirls around, and starts walking on, down the tunnel, leaving him to pick his jaw back up off the ground, and recompose himself.

He realizes he’s gawking at her-- when he should be walking with her-- and quickly snaps out of it, to jog up and join her, turning on the bright yellow flashlight app from his phone, to shine a light on their long, wide, mortar path.

Sky pulls out some silver-wrapped peppermint gum and offers Shy a stick. She politely declines and pulls out her own secret stash of hard strawberry candy from her pocket, pops a piece in her mouth, and grinningly offers him some. He shakes his head with a humored smile, as he opens his gumstick and slides it between his lips.

Then he grabs her tote bag, from off her shoulder, and carries it for her, without asking, and without acting like it’s a big deal. She smiles at him, with fond, appreciative regard in her eyes, fast craving him-- increasingly more.

Skyler and Shyanne amble down the underground tunnel, chatting, chuckling and flirting, in hushed tones, as they follow the tunnel, all the way down, and they reach a fork in the road, with 2 diagonal tunnel paths, on each side of them, and the 5th pathway, leading them straight ahead, if they keep going.

“They all look the same. --Which way do we go?” Shy looks around at their multiple options of passage, in total perplexity.

“Yeah. If only we had, a trusty little rat named Ben, to help lead us back out into the sunlight.” Skyler studies each path carefully, “Well-- I turned my phone back on, back in Brook’s Safe Room, and got access to her private wifi, which let my map app work, but I couldn’t get any actual phone signal for some reason.

“I dunno if Team Crazy Cult found a way to block it or what, but we’re definitely not gettin’ any reception down here. No private wifi either. And my map app only works with the web, which means-- no communication to the outside world-- until we get closer to the exit.” Then he looks forward, “So-- since we’re already headed straight-- might as well see where it leads to, so we don’t get lost. Whadaya think?”

Shy sighs wearily, and nods her head at him with a tired smile, “OK. Let’s do it.”

Skyler offers his hand to Shyanne, with a peacefully knowing expression, to help her keep the faith, by reenergizing her, with an affectionate bond. She realizes this, and smiles.

Revitalized by his touching tenderness and strength, she accepts his hand, and he squeezes her palm softly, with a warm smile-- then walks with her, into the scary, blind abyss, that lingers on before them.

The flashlight from Skyler’s phone, starts to more clearly reveal the pale color of the huge, funny-shaped stones, that ornament the walls of the tunnel, as it shines bright, onto the large, dirty, cement path ahead of them.

There’s something eerie about the stones. Shyanne can’t put her finger on it just yet, but she feels an ominous vibe about this tunnel, as she glances around its spooky darkness--

--And she wants to get out of here as soon as humanly possible.

“So--” Shy tries to keep her creeped out nerves calm, by distracting herself with conversation, “I never really got a formal introduction to meeting your friends. Guess you’re all, like, the cool kids, at your college, huh?” She smiles, “I always wanted that. Like-- a cool pack of friends, who are always available to just, like, hangout, and do fun stuff together with, or whatever.

“I have 2 cool best friends. But I never see them. One is always busy working, and doesn’t like to go out or hang out much, and the other lives out of state, with her dad, with a mental illness. So we never see each other. It’s cool how you and your “fellow cool kids” like to hangout and do fun stuff together.” She chuckles admiringly.

Skyler chortles, “Cool kids? There is nothing cool about us. My friends and I are extreme misfits, who just happen to “misfit” perfectly well together.

“Oh come on.” She laughs, “You’re not misfits. I’m a misfit. That’s why I’m alone all the time.”

“Nah, you’re just alone because you haven’t found your tribe yet. And your tribe-- is the tribe of misfits. Like my tribe. We’re just a funny tribe of funky misfits, who don’t clash. That’s not equivalent to society’s definition of “fitting in”, haha.” He chuckles sincerely at the sentiment.

“Oh really? OK then, how are you all misfits? Explain.”

“OK. Well, Zack and Lissette are misfits because of their-- *unique*-- personalities.”

“Meaning?”

“He gets on everybody’s nerves, and she scares people.”

“Oh.” Shy thinks about it, “Yeah, I-- I guess that would make them misfits.”

“Then of course, Nathan’s a misfit because of his health condition.”

“Aw, that’s not fair. People get sick and have medical problems all the time. That shouldn’t make them misfits.”

“Well. Yeah. It shouldn’t. But it usually does. And it’s messed up. So he’s one of us, in the tribe of misfits. Then Hadji is a misfit, because of his life-consuming gaming addiction. Sometimes he gets fantasy confused with reality, and he basically lives through the cyber universe-- making it hard for him to connect with people OFFLINE-- unless they’re sharing in his addiction with him.”

“You guys are gaming addicts?”

“Nah--” Skyler chuckles, shaking his head, “HADJI is a gaming addict. The rest of us just LIKE to game. But we wouldn’t die or lose our minds without it.”

“But Hadji would.”

“In a New York Minute.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, heheh. Then Steven is a misfit, because of his paralytically introverted social anxiety disorder.”

“He has a disorder?”

Skyler shrugs with a casual head tilt, “Anxiety. It’s just his nerves. He’s getting better, but for the longest time, we couldn’t even get him to go out to eat in public, or go to gaming arcades, or anything social. We weren’t even sure what gave him the serenity to hang out with us.

“I mean it was just me, Zack, and Lissette, at first. Actually, it was just me and Zack, since preschool, until we were like 8 or 9. Then it was me, Zack, and Lissette until we were like, 14, I think. Then it was us, plus Nathan, then Steven, then Hadji, all in that same year.”

“Ah so it’s been a few years for you all. At least a decade for you and Lissette, and nearly 2 decades for you and Zack.”

“Decades? What? No, we--” Skyler realizes he’s caught himself in his little white lie with Shy, that he told her to impress her. “Oh, uh-- I mean-- yeah. Right.” He clears his throat, looking down in thought.

“So what about you? How are you a misfit, Mr. Skyler Stone?”

“Me?” Skyler smiles knowingly to himself...

“Because I’m the mad scientist, full of hidden hacking secrets, unyielding mystery, and an eternally distracting, all-consuming, fixated focus, on building and designing things all the time. I’m not always mentally present with people, and even when I am-- I don’t usually let people in.” Sky shrugs, “I keep people at a distance.”

“Says the guy with the airtight clique.”

“They don’t all know me as well as they think they do.”

Shy looks at him curiously, trying to repress the slight chill that just went down her spine, “What-- what do you mean by that, Skyler?”

He shrugs, “Nothin’. I’m just-- more of an inconspicuously autonomous vortex of hazard and quandary, than most people realize.”

“And in English, that means?”

“A secretly detached black hole of danger and confusion.” He taps the side of his pocket, where his Mother’s white, wooden Cross is still missing.

She studies him with a concerned stare of uncertainty. But he just keeps staring ahead. She gulps, in cautious thought, suddenly feeling a bit less safe down here.

Who is this guy she’s walking down a dark tunnel with?

“Why are you telling *me* then? If you’re so closed to everyone else-- why are you so open-- with *me*?”

“You don’t know everything about me either.” There’s a chilling air of dark secrecy in his voice.

She hears it-- and stops-- grabbing his phone-flashlight from him, and she points it at him-- staring at him. He realizes, stops, turns, and looks at her.

“What don’t I know about you, Skyler?”

Suddenly Skyler realizes how his words must sound to her, especially in a dark, creepy tunnel, while being chased by hitmen who just tried to kill them, with a scary serial killer running around town, and he shakes his head with a chuckle.

“Oh, nothing, angel. I’m just talkin’ about, like, personality and style stuff. It’s not that serious.”

But she’s not satisfied with this. “It’s because I’m alone, isn’t it?”

“*What* is?”

“The reason why you tell me more, and show me more, of who you are, than you do with other people. It’s because I don’t have a giant social circle, to expose any of your secrets to. You trust me, because-- there’s virtually no one for me to betray your trust with. And who’s gonna listen to the weird, trippy, prophet girl any way, right?”

He thinks a moment, but it’s more to figure out how to respond to her, than it is to actually consider her theory--

--Because he’s already considered it.

--And she’s right.

--That *is* why he trusted her more.

So he just stares back at her-- which only makes her shiver more. He steps toward her. She steps back. He stops and gazes at her seriously.

“You honestly think I would hurt you?”

“No, I-- I just-- I’m just not 100% sure I know who you are-- sometimes.”

“Nobody knows who anybody is 100%. Most people don’t even know each other 25%. That’s why we have such a high divorce rate and broken home culture. People are so busy hopping in the sack with each other, they don’t even bother to get to know each other.

“Then they have kids, or move in together, and they realize they don’t know each other at all, and maybe they even hate each other, because they got tricked and seduced by the hypnotic power of sex, and then when things get hard, there’s not enough love, bond, and actual spiritual and moral discipline, to make them roll up their sleeves, and try harder-- or smarter-- to make things work with each other.

“Instead of determining their life mates by how good they are in bed-- they should be determining their lifemates by how well they know each other-- and by how much they’d pick them to be the one, who they ever got stranded on a deserted island with. Cause anybody can be good in bed. But if you could never be stranded on a desert island with somebody-- you have no business having kids with them.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“No, I’m making a point, to let you know that I am aware of the dangers, of not getting to know somebody, before you commit your heart or body to them, Shy-- and I would never do that to you. That’s why I let you in more than I let in anyone else.

“Because I take you seriously, and we’re exclusive, and I want-- No-- I *need*-- to have someone who-- who I can let-- *all* the way in. -- I... --I want you to be my lover-- but in order for that to work-- I need you to be my friend-- *first*.”

He always wanted to use that line. *Well*-- ever since he first read it, that is. But he didn’t have anyone, who he liked enough, to try it out on. So when he read that bit, of apparently compelling dialogue, from one of the romance novels-- that he perused *purely* for educational purposes, of course-- he seriously made a mental note, to put it in his relational back pocket, and use it for the perfect moment. With the perfect girl.

--And this was that moment.

--She was that girl.

She eyes him interrogatively, and flashes the light of his phone’s screen at his side pants pocket, with a nod at it, “What did that Cross mean to you any way? Why’d you freak out when you lost it?”

He looks down at his now Cross-barren pocket, and realizes that she’s digging deep-- and he won’t get her to keep walking with him-- until he shows her what’s buried there, deep below.

So he gulps in tiredly sorrowful thought, exhausted by his own heartbreak, “It was my Mother’s Cross. I held onto it tight... when I was-- locked inside that trunk. When I was-- watching all those bad men do-- whatever it was they were doing, through the keyhole. Back-- when I was-- 6.

“It gives me hope. It gives me faith. It gives me strength and courage, and-- it gives me my Mother and brother back. In a weird way. I guess.” He clears his throat, feeling uncomfortably naked in front of her, all of the sudden-- and hoping, desperately, that she won’t ask him to bare any more of his soul, down here in these dank, cryptic tunnels, “Is that a good enough secret, that makes me deserving of your full trust again?”

He gazes at her softly. She still stares at him a bit distrustfully. Then she thinks about it, and she lowers the flashlight slightly, softening her expression a bit. So he steps over to her, and surprises her with a hug. Stunned, she hugs him back, melting into his pure, warm embrace.

“I know I’m a little weird, Shy. Sometimes you love it. Other times you fear it. But the fact that it randomly freaks you out, shows you why I’m a misfit. Who hangs out with other misfits. Because we’re all misfits. Who need each other. To anchor each other. Cause without each other-- we’d all probably-- be alone. --Like you.”

Shyanne looks down, realizing that it’s true, and she hugs him tighter, closing her eyes-- won back into trusting him again. Maybe even more now. The flicker of a shadow whips past her snuggled face, as she sinks into Skyler’s refreshingly wholesome arms.

But she doesn’t see it.

“Now--”, he pulls back and looks at her sheepish face, “Can we just agree to focus on finding our way out of here, and save any issues of insecurity with each other, until AFTER we’re back out into safety?”

She nods, with an apologetic smile, as a little tear of stressed-out anxiety cascades down her cheek, and she hands him back his flashlit phone. Skyler takes it from her, and sees that her hands are shaking, slightly.

So he smiles sweetly, gently removes her glasses from her eyes, slides them into the back pocket of his jeans, with his lit-up phone, holds both her hands, and softly wipes her tear away, while still holding her hand.

He gazes at her for a moment. Then he gently holds her emotional face in his warm palm, and kisses her innocently. Sky feels her body immediately relax, and submit to his, as his lips gently massage hers.

But he doesn't see the black shadow that glides by behind them.

All he knows, is that she tastes like sweet, strawberry candy. And all she knows, is that he tastes like electrifying, peppermint bubble gum.

Their kiss becomes more passionate, as they indulge into each other. Slowly, Skyler slips her big pink tote bag-- with the tranquilizer guns in them-- off of his shoulder, dropping them to the ground beside them, and he backs Shyanne up against the dark, underground tunnel wall, as he holds her waist with his other hand, gliding his fingers onto her soft, bare skin, beneath her shirt, while she glides her hands down his hard, muscular chest.

Two creepy-looking shadows flash past them, together now. But Sky and Shy are too distracted by each other to notice.

Skyler lets go of the side of Shyanne's neck and face, to search for her hand. When he finds it, he intertwines his fingers with hers, and slowly raises her hand up, above her head, against the smooth, hard, bubbled wall, as they kiss each other heatedly. Shy lets her arm slowly elevate up with Sky's, against the large, round stones, that protrude out of the slick, cave-like wall.

Behind them-- a few more shadows flash by in a flurry.

Totally unaware of this, Sky lifts Shy's hand up higher, against the tunnel wall above them, as he starts to kiss her cheek.

--And then her neck.

--And then her chest.

--And then her cleavage.

--And then she quakes in breathy pleasure, as he kisses her.

Until--

--*OW!*

Shyanne yanks her hand back, and pulls away from the wall, while still cradled in the covetous arms of Skyler-- who won't let her go-- as she holds the knuckles of one hand in her other hand, rubbing them softly.

Her silver Cross charm bracelet jingles suddenly, like Christmas bells, as she shakes her hand, in pain, to shake off any insect that might be biting her. Then she quickly turns to look up at the wall, to try to find the creepy crawly critter that bit her.

"What happened? What's wrong?" Skyler looks at her with alert concern, and then realizes that she's massaging her hand. So he quickly pulls out the lit-up smartphone from inside his pant pocket, and he flashes the light of its luminescence onto her hands.

More eerie dark shadows flit by, behind them.

"I think a bug just bit me." She rubs her knuckle, "I forgot where we are. There's probably creepy crawly critters everywhere-- even on the walls."

"Really?" He sounds genuinely puzzled, "I didn't see any critters-- and I've been looking for them, to show us a way out of here."

Sky cushions Shy's silky hand within the palm of his rougher hand, to see what's wrong with it, and furrows his brow at the slight bit of bright red blood, that he sees eking out from one of her knuckles. He immediately looks up at the cave wall, pointing the flashlight from his phone onto the area.

Shyanne looks up with Skyler, to find the cutting culprit, and they both watch the light reveal a giant, red-rusted, dull, silver metal steak knife, sticking out of the wall-- with the sharp razor-edged blade, that apparently is what *actually* nicked Shy-- as it drips a single drop of her fresh red blood, onto the pale, fulvous stone, that its implanted in.

The light *also* reveals-- the round, tawny, human skull in the wall-- that the knife is *actually* lodged in.

...Along with all of the other human skulls that are, more clearly, buried partially-- or mostly-- into the wall.

Skyler and Shyanne back up with a gasp, as they see the light flood the walls, displaying a tunnel--

--that's *littered* with human skulls.

But there's an order-- an organized pattern-- to the way that these skulls are entombed into these secret, subsurface tunnels. They aren't littering the walls.

--They're *designing* them.

"They're not *stones*..." Shyanne realizes, "--They're *skulls*." She stares at them, in nauseously terrified horror, "--*HUMAN* skulls."

"And they're not here to be hidden." Sky surveys them in his own gruesome realization, "They're here to be seen. Shown off. Like-- they're part of the decoration, or something.

--All the way down from one end of the tunnel, to the other." Sky sweeps the illumination of his cellular flashlight, from one side of the tunnel, to the other, showcasing an infinite wall-- of human skulls.

Shy's heart beats out of her chest so fast she can hardly breathe, as she staggers backward, past Sky, who's still standing, in stupefied awe, of the human skull decorations, that fill the tunnel walls for miles.

CRUNCH!

Shyanne gasps, startled, and looks down, to see what hard object her foot just stepped on. Skyler turns around, as she bends over, and shines his light on the object, as she picks it up.

It looks like a long, thick, dirty, beige stick.

Sky's face darkens, in more realization, "It's a leg bone-- a *human* leg bone."

Shy yelps in fearful disgust, and drops the bone back to the ground.

Suddenly they hear running, and see shadows speed past them. They both gasp and jump back, as Skyler shines his light toward the shadows with his flashlight, and holds Shyanne back, behind him, with his other hand. He can feel her shaking like an earthquake-- She's hyperventilating. So he looks back at her, with a worried stare.

"Are you having one of your prophet seizures?" He whispers cautiously to her, "Did you just get another vision-- err-- *message*-- from the-- *spirit*-- world-- or whatever?"

She looks at him, as if abruptly startled out of her frantic fear, "*What?*" --Then she realizes what he's saying and jolts, shaking her head with a quivering whisper, "No-- I'm just terrified that we're about to die a horrible and gruesome death, after they kidnap and torture us, for God knows how long, until we beg them for the sweet release of quick slaughter. Is that *alright*?" She glares at him in rhetorically angry fright.

"Yeah." He jerks his head downward, with a realizing nod of understanding-- and fearful accord.

Suddenly they see more shadows flicker by, as they jump at the faint sound of running, that starts to echo louder-- and *louder*-- and *LOUDER*. They try to back up even further, into the sleek, glossy, human-skull-encrusted, crypt-wall-of-murder exhibition-- that they're already backed up hard against.

And they can't even use the tranquilizer guns to defend themselves-- because Shy's tote bag is all the way across the wide tunnel path, slumped over, by their kissing wall--

--on the other side of all the dark, fast shadows, darting past them.

“Um-- Skyler?” She breathes rapidly, as she stares at all the countless shadows, skulking around the fork in the road, further back-- shadows that are slowly getting bigger, in the tiny echoes of light, that Skyler’s phone radiates at that distance.

“Yeah?” He stiffens trepidatiously, as he hears the shadows pitter patter around, in hushed, whispered tones, over by the end of the tunnel that they came from.

“Can we run now?” Her voice trembles in panic.

“Great idea--”

Sky suddenly snaps out of his paralyzed zone of frozen thought, bolts back over to the wall that they were kissing on, leans onto his toes, and tugs HARD at the giant steak knife that’s embedded into the skull decor, trying to wrench it out.

But it’s stuck.

Of course it’s stuck.

He pulls on it harder.

“*What are you DOING?? We have to get OUT of here!!*” Shy tenses her arms and hands out at her sides, in a freaked out whisper at him.

“I have to get this out! It’s our only weapon-- in case the tranquilizer guns are locked or jammed or something, and don’t work!”

He jerks at the knife, while lurching his body upward, onto the front of his feet again.

Shaking Shyanne just looks back at the looming shadows, that expand on the walls in front of her-- *petrified*.

Finally, Skyler YANKS the giant, sharp-ridged steak knife, out of the cemented skull, falls back a bit, but catches himself, and looks over at palpitating Shyanne, with a winded little smile.

“There. *NOW* we can go.”

He picks up her tote bag, grabs her hand with his butcher-knife-free hand-- *and they run like hell*, down the hidden fusty tunnel of human decay, away from the lurking shadows, and into the direction that they were originally walking--

--Further into the sinisterly man-made cave-- and down the deathly rabbit hole...

--as the towering, ghostly, cloaked shadows-- quickly advance upon the skull-trimmed walls, of the chilling, underground passage, behind them.

CHAPTER

[36]

MEET THE PSYCHO FACTORY

Eventually, Shyanne slows down to a stop, and bends over, to hold her knees, out of breath.

Skyler stops running, realizing this, and jogs back over to her, looking extremely nervous, “Come on. They could still be behind us.”

She shakes her head, breathy, “I can’t. I’m too tired.”

“Well would you rather be *dead*?”

“*What??!*”

“Sorry-- *Sorry*-- Bad motivational tactic.”

“Yeah.” She flinches a nod at the ground, realizing she can barely breathe.

He taps the side of his pants in jittery thought, trying to figure out how to get her to hurry up and move with him, so they can get out of there, “Do you want me to kiss you to calm you down?”

“I-- can’t-- breathe-- Skyler.” She schools him through gritted teeth, as she remains looking down, trying to breathe.

“Right. Sorry. Um--” He looks behind her, anxiously, to see if the shadows are still chasing them. Then he grabs her, “Here. I’ll carry you.”

“What? *Whoa!!*”

Skyler picks Shyanne up, swings her over his shoulder, and speed walks them further down the tunnel-- holding her with one hand-- and the super long, giant, steak knife and tote bag-- in the other.

"Holy crap you're strong!" She gawks in winded awe, "Do you move bodies *often*?"

"Haha, very funny." He stares ahead of them, to make sure nobody is heading them off at the front, to ambush them, "I just decided along time ago, to make sure I'm the strongest guy in the room, so that what happened to me and my family when I was 6-- could never happen to us again."

"Wow. Well-- Good job." Shyanne struggles to heave in and out, in her short, deep puffs, still trying to catch her breath, as Skyler speeds down past the cave-like walls of death, with her swinging cavalierly behind his back.

Eventually, Sky's pace slows down. But he won't stop, as Shy just humorously bounces behind him, over his shoulder, ironically listening to a remix of Third Day's song "Tunnel" on her iPod, through her little pink earphones, as she sucks on her bloody knuckle, to stem the bleeding. Finally, she sighs, and pulls her headphones down, to talk to Skyler.

"Um-- Sky-- I think they're gone. You can put me down now." Bored Shyanne muffles out, in between literally licking her wounds.

"They could still be behind us." He stares forward, entranced in flight mode.

"No-- They're not."

"But they could be."

"Skyler-- Put me down." Her voice is serious.

Skyler stops, hearing her tone, thinks-- and puts Shy down. She fixes herself and looks at him. His hands are the ones shaking now, as he compulsively rubs the upper right jeans pocket, where his Mother's white, wooden Cross use to be. She realizes this, and hugs him.

"It's OK, Skyler. You're not trapped in that trunk any more." She whispers in his ear.

"Yes I am." He admits, as his eyes water up, "All the time." He realizes, and his voice chokes, "I never left that trunk. And I'm the only one who feels it. Cause I was the only one who was there. Trapped. Alone. In that trunk. Watching part of my soul get ripped away from me. And wondering why my Father wasn't there to save us."

He's surprised at the tear that falls away from his eye, as he looks down sorrowfully. "--And now," he sniffs, and smacks the tear away from his cheek, "I-- I'll always be trapped. Alone. In that trunk. Watching part of my soul get ripped away from me. And wondering why my Father isn't here to save us." He confesses to her in a tearful zone of mournful loss.

She pulls back to look at him, as his eyes drift over to hers, "Well, you know your Dad would have saved you all if he could have. But he was just as much a victim as you were. Now you're all he has, and I'm sure he's doing the best he can.

"But Sky-- I want you to know-- that one day we're gonna get you out of that trunk. And today-- we're gonna get us both out of this tunnel. And you're not gonna feel trapped-- or targeted-- any more. I pray to God you know that, and feel that-- and live that.

"Cause God saved you for a reason. And it wasn't for you to just-- fail now. You're a winner-- and you're gonna win. You're a survivor-- and you're gonna survive. You're a hero-- and you're gonna save the ones you love-- and get saved back.

“Your Father has not abandoned you. Not your earth Dad, nor your Heavenly Dad. Jesus loves you-- and so do I. And one day, you will get full, true justice, peace of mind, and freedom-- from the chains that those supervillains put on your mind. --So that you can go be the superhero that you were born to be. You just have to *know* that. You just have to *believe*. OK?”

She holds his face with both her hands, as she gazes back at him, also tearful herself, and she nods to him, trying to get him to nod with her. But he just looks down sadly, as another tear streams down his face, silently.

So she wipes her own tear from her eye, then she wipes his tearful face, with a sad, chuckling smile, and she kisses him sweetly on both cheeks, followed by a quick smooch on his lips. She hugs him warmly again, pulls back to look at him, grabbing his hand, and nods for him to break his trance of sadness, and follow her.

“Come on.” She smiles, moving forward, as she walks backward, further into the tunnel, while facing him, and she pulls his hand toward her, to join her.

He gradually follows her, and mumbles to her as they walk on, “Alright. But if Freddy Kruger pops out of these walls, wearing a policeman’s uniform, I’ll bitch-slap him in the face with his own scissor-hands, then pistol whip him till he cries uncle.”

Shyanne cracks up laughing. Skyler chuckles slightly at the thought, as she hugs his arm sweetly.

“Sorry about your hand.” He kisses her wounded knuckles.

“Aw.” She kisses his cheek back, with a heart-warmed giggle that makes him blush.

But then he hears something, stops walking, no longer laughing, and he puts his hand in front of Shyanne, stopping her abruptly too.

“Wait-- You hear that?”

“What?”

“That muffled chanting or humming or something, and somebody sniffing or crying? Like a ghost or something.”

“Wow. Either you have really good ears, or a really good imagination, when it comes to spooking the mess out of me. --NO. I hear nothing. Now let’s just get the heck out of here. *NOW*, please. It’s already creepy down here. Now you’re giving me the heebie-jeebie--”

Shy cuts herself off when she steps forward and trips with a gasp, on the indent of a vent in the ground. Sky grabs her, catching her from falling, and escorts her off the vent.

“Whoa. There’s a level lower than this? Where are we? In the air ducts of *hell*?”

Skyler laughs at her bewilderment and choice of words-- feeling the same way-- as he wonders similar thoughts. Then he crouches down and looks through the vent. His eyes widen at what he sees. Shyanne looks at the back of her hand, and pouts girlishly.

“Oh darn. I think I broke a nail back at the latter, when we were climbing down, and it just snapped off completely when you grabbed my hand and--”

“Sshh-- Get down!”

Skyler grabs Shyanne’s hand and pulls her down to his level, facing the vent, and turning her iPod off. She scoffs.

“What? My nails are *real*.” She laughs, “So when I break one, it means something. Cause then I have to wait for it to grow back. Which, well, doesn’t really take that long, in all fairness, but still--”

She starts to babble. Skyler gently blankets her mouth with one hand, and points down at the vent, with his other hand, directing her to look at it. Shy freezes, wondering why the hell Sky’s hand is covering her mouth, in a creepy, dark underground tunnel, with cult hitmen after them, and The Valentine Killer on the loose, and--

--*Ohhhhh...*

She remembers that they're still in danger, and that's why his hand is on her mouth-- to protect her-- and she releases the look of stunned offense, that abruptly started to flash across her face. Then she looks down at the vent--

--and her eyes widen too.

She grabs her shiny, sheeny, pink-rimmed glasses, from Skyler's back pocket, puts them on and readjusts them, just to make sure she's seeing correctly.

And she is.

The creepy humming and chanting Sky heard, was coming from the hooded, white-robed people, who march along a red candle-lit circle, with guns drawn on their centerpiece. And the sniffing and crying that Sky heard, is coming from their centerpiece-- the person who sits in the chair in the middle of their circle. And the person in that chair--

--is Brook.

Their chanting gets louder, as the creepy white robes circle around Brook, holding their guns out at her. Brook whimpers, as she places the gun, from her shaking hand, into her mouth, and cocks it, to pull the trigger.

Shyanne huffs to herself, pulls out one of the tranquilizer guns, from her big pink tote bag on Skyler's shoulder, aims it at Brook's neck-- which is a pretty clear shot, and not too far away-- and she shoots Brook with a tranquilizer dart, with a slight windy sound.

Putting her out of her misery.

And possibly saving her life.

Sky looks at her, realizing what she did, and freaks out a bit, immediately pulling her from the vent, as Officer Slager looks up from his white hood, and up at the now vacant vent. Skyler hurries Shyanne through the tunnel, back toward the fork in the road, whispering to her anxiously.

“What the heck were you doing, Shy?”

“Tranquilizer darts. Thin needles ya can barely see. Knocked her out. Made her look dead when she’s not. So they’ll probably just think she had a heart attack or something. And according to what she told us, they’ll just dump her in their-- “Garden of The Dead” for the day, so when she wakes up-- she can just run away.”

“What if they know she’s not dead?”

“Well even if they don’t think she’s dead-- they’re not gonna kill her while she’s knocked out. They have a process. A creepy satanic ritual or something. They’ll at least wait till she wakes up first. So we at least bought her some time to come to Jesus before they off her. I dunno. At least, now, we don’t have to watch her die.”

“OK, well, even if it works, which is a really big if-- Why would you risk your own life to save hers?”

“Well on a practical level, we need her to testify in court against all these nuts. Cause Theresa and her Core 4 Truth Sleuths sure can’t. And people have dismissed videos as made up theater... --when they don’t want to believe cops are bad. Or kids are bad. Or pretty rich people are bad. So that’s #1. --Proof;

“Then #2-- is Punishment. Death is too easy. I want her to live with the pain of what she did-- and the deep loss that it caused. Let her *FEEL* the pain, before she leaves this mortal coil, and sees the afterlife.

“And #3. Progress. I want her to convert all the other hell brats from her pathetic Hate Club to shut all their crap down. And she can inspire them to do that. Or blackmail them. I don’t care. Either way-- same result.

“So Proof, Punishment and Progress. Plus-- Power. Of self. Cause, I mean, villains will always be villains. But the rest of us don’t have to be cowards, who just stand by and watch. The best way to test the strength of your soul is to ask yourself:

“If society was made up of nothing but people who were just like me, would someone like Hitler fail or succeed? I’d like to think we’d kick that super villain off the cliff. Not follow him right off it. WE are the super heroes. This world belongs to US. We were saved. Now it’s our job to save others. What would Jesus do? Ya know?”

Shyanne tugs playfully at Skyler’s WWJD bracelet. Sky looks at it. Then stops Shy-- gazes at her-- and hugs her, kissing her sweetly.

“You’re a better person than me, Shy Valentine. Cause I’d just let all these monsters burn. Demons be damned.”

Shy smirks with a knowing nod, as Sky shakes his head in awe at her, and walks her through the tunnel, back toward the fork in the road.

As they reach the fork in the road, Skyler finally sees a mouse, that scampers down a different route. He gasps with a giant, funny grin--

“BEN!”

He starts to go down the tunnel, after the mouse, but Shyanne stops him. Startled, he looks at her, to see her staring at something in a different tunnel.

“What?”

She points, “Look. Those are the big, dark, scary shadows we were running from.”

Skyler steps out of the escape tunnel, peeks his head out to look at what she’s looking at, and sees them--

The shadows that they thought were chasing them, back when they heard running, weren’t monsters or ghosts--

They were children.

Dirty, half-naked, in shabby, ripped, old, filthy rags, looking skinny, hungry, scared, some sickly, and ranging in ages from maybe 12, all the way down to the newborn baby being held in one of the kids’ hands.

There are maybe 20 of them, hiding, huddled and crouching in fear--
--in the wrong tunnel.

Skyler gawks in confused shock and disbelief, "What the hell are kids doing down here?"

She looks at him funny.

He checks himself, realizing, "Sorry. I mean-- what the *heck* are kids doing down here?"

She flashes him a "That's not what that look I gave you meant, but OK" expression, and shakes her head slightly, "Remember what Brook said? Some kids got away?" She nods toward the frightened children. "They're runaways. From The Gods of The Universe "Wealth Is God" monster cult."

Sky looks thunderstruck, as he realizes, "And they're going the wrong way. HEY--"

He jogs over to the shivering kids, who apparently have stopped running, both due to being lost, and due to mistaking Skyler and Shyanne for senior cult members-- fearing them-- and any further punishment that will await them, if they keep running away from their captors.

"Hey-- kids-- you" Skyler reaches out toward them, but cuts himself short when they shrink back in fear of him, as Shyanne rushes up behind him.

Skyler looks at the knife in his hands and the tranq guns in Shy's tote, and realizes the kids are afraid, so he hides the knife in her tote bag and switches up his approach.

"OK-- We're not with the bad people who hurt you. We're not going to hurt you. Do any of you understand what I'm saying?"

The kids all slowly nod, still holding themselves in fear. Skyler and Shyanne can see whip lashings on their arms, legs and backs.

Sky nods, "OK. OK, great. Well if you're trying to escape the bad men and get out of here, you're going the wrong way. You have to follow the rats. Always follow the rats.

"Now, my name is Skyler Stone-- Her name is-- well-- she's my friend. So if anybody asks you about her, just tell them you don't know anything. But she and I are gonna show you the way out of here, and lead you to safety, to help you escape, OK? Is that OK?"

The kids look at each other tentatively and then back at Skyler, and they nod. He nods back, relieved.

"OK. Let's go." He looks at Shyanne, "You lead the front, so I know you make it out of here. I'll take up the rear, to make sure no stragglers get left behind."

Shy nods at him, both in fear and admiration of his quick, decisive heroism, and she looks at the kids, "Alright guys!" She whispers loudly, "Everybody grab somebody's hand-- and don't let go no matter what!

"We're gonna play a game called Super Long Rope, where we make a really long rope with our arms, holding onto each other tight, OK? And your reward for playing the game right, and never letting anyone go-- is that-- um-- well-- you get to freedom, and you're no longer enslaved abuse victims, of an epicly evil psycho super cult from hell. Ready?"

The kids all nod, as Skyler steps behind the last few orphans, and he nods at Shy to go. She nods back, and quickly marches the kids out of the wrong evil cult tunnel, back across the main long straight tunnel, and over into the right tunnel, where she and Skyler were about to escape out from.

Back at the evil “Gods of The Universe Trinity” Headquarters that Skyler and Shyanne just escaped, still hooded, white-robed Officer Slager rushes into their security office, to see a hooded, white-robed, 18-year-old boy, with a security badge on his chest, sleeping in a reclined chair, with his legs crossed, up on the security desk.

Slager kicks the boy’s chair back, making the boy fall backwards, to the ground, and hit his head on a trash can, only an inch away from the sharp key hooks protruding out from the side desk drawer. The kid jolts awake as he falls, startled, catches his breath, shakes it off, looks up, sees Slager, gasps, and quickly gets up, rolling his chair back over to the security desk.

But Slager just smacks the back of his head, and shoves his chair away, rolling him back into the file cabinet, where he slams loudly into the metallic drawers. Various papers and cult figurines rain down on the boy’s head, from the top.

Slager gets on the keyboard, checks the video monitors, and sees Skyler and Shyanne racing out of the tunnel, with all the orphan runaways. Then he pauses the tunnel screenshot of Skyler and Shyanne, as Sky looks back, to look behind them, with his hand on Shy’s lower back, as she rushes the last child forward, out of the tunnel. Slager scowls darkly.

“Kill them all.”

The emotionless air in Slager’s voice could freeze the sun, as he so blithely orders his men, who stand by him, to massacre innocent children-- and butcher the son of one of his own peers in uniform.

But no one flinches at his command. They are all just as cold, dead, and psychotic as he is. They’re merely the submissive followers, of the villainous degeneracy, that Slager dominantly leads.

So they watch Slager curiously, as he glares hard and maliciously, into Skyler’s handsomely calculated face, on the screen.

“But first--” Slager decides, “Make sure everyone knows, that our young and slumberous *lil killah*, Mr. Skyler Stone here, has a dark and scary secret. Make sure the whole world knows that--

Skyler Stone--

--is The Valentine Killer.”

CHAPTER

[37]

MEET THE FAMILY FEUD

Sky and Shy speed walk out of the tunnel, inclining upward, with all the kids, onto the rural grassy side of a state road, under a busy bridge, as the freeway whips and thunders up above them. A fleet of taxis await them.

“Aright kids!” Skyler points to the taxis, “All of you, get in a car, and tell the driver, to take you to the nearest hospital! Which is Saint Valentine Hospital! My Dad’s a good cop. I’ll have him and some of his FBI agent friends meet up with you there and take care of you--OK?”

The ecstatic children nod and race into the cars. But some of them stop to hug Skyler and Shyanne first. Sky and Shy trade heartwarmed looks, as they hug the kids back, and the kids run into the cars, to the puzzlement of a few very confused drivers.

Shy chuckles, impressed, “You got us a bunch of taxis?”

“Text-A-Taxi.”

“Text-A-Taxi?” She chuckles, as they rush runaways into cars, and start filling each taxi up to capacity, with kids.

“Yeah. My phone reception started coming back in random fragments, when we finally started following little Ben, out of the proper tunnel, to the exit.”

Skyler nods over at the little mouse, eating trash by the side of the road.

“--So I-- Texted A Taxi. --Six taxis, to be exact.”

Shyanne giggles, “Wow. OK. We’re in the middle of nowhere though, so what did you text our taxi?”

“The geographical map coordinates I pulled off of--”

“Wait-- Don’t tell me--” She stops at the door of the taxi, as he opens the door for her, and she turns to face him, “--a high tech computer app you built in your bedroom.”

He shrugs his face, with the casually pondering tilt of his head, and a thinking glance into the sky, as they slam the door on the last car full of kids, “Well, kind of. I haven’t programmed it to be fluid enough, to translate perfectly to computers yet. I really just designed it to be a phone app. Still workin’ out the kinks. Need a few more supplies for that though.”

“You’re amazing, Skyler Stone.” She shakes her head at him with a proud-- and amused-- smile, as she slides into the backseat of one of the taxis.

Skyler blushes, with a flattered and involuntary beam, looking down with boyish glee, at her open admiration of him, and he shuts her door. Then he hears a pile of backed up messages suddenly bombard his phone in loud musical dubstep loops that cut each other off, and he opens a few of them.

He furrows his brow, realizing they’re all emergency messages from his friends, that piled up when he turned his phone off. Messages like:

“Where are you??”,

“Lisette got attacked by The Valentine Killer!”,

“We’re all at the hospital now”, and,

“DUUUUUUDE...”

“Whoa--”, Shock and worry suddenly consume Sky as he jolts around to the other side of the taxi, gets in, throws his black and orange sunglasses on over his eyes, and shouts to the driver--

“TO THE HOSPITAL!”

Shyanne follows Skyler as he jumps out of their taxi to greet a very upset-looking FBI Agent Diaz, under the tall, giant, brick red, cement carport of Saint Valentine Hospital.

“Agent Diaz! You got my message!” He grins gratefully at her, as he lifts his sunglasses up, off his eyes, and onto his head.

“Yeah, Skyler-- We have to talk--” She starts.

“Great, I just have to see my friend right quick, and then I’ll tell you whatever you need to know to catch the guys who did this to these poor kids. They’re the same people who tried to kill us at Brook Bradley’s house, like I told you in the voicemail.”

“No-- Skyler-- That’s not what I meant, I--” She suddenly notices all the kids pouring out of the taxis, “Holy crap that’s a lot of kids.”

“I know right? God put us in the right place at the right time, to do the right thing. Oh-- You can pay the taxi drivers right? FBI cashbox?”

“What? Oh-- Yeah. That’s not a problem. But Skyler-- I have to tell you something--”

“Great. I’ll talk to you in a second. C’mon Shy.” Sky grabs Shyanne’s hand and runs with her past Agent Diaz.

“Hi, nice to meet you!” Shyanne’s voice jerks out as Skyler drags her into the chaotic hospital lobby.

“Nice to meet you.” Agent Diaz quietly mumbles to herself, as she watches them race into the hospital, with a forlorn look of deep sympathy on her face.

Then she looks at all the kids who stand in front of her, staring at her, as the taxi drivers wait to get paid.

--And she puffs in rough anticipation of a very tough and exhausting ordeal.

Inside Saint Valentine Hospital, Sky and Shy race past harried, hard working nurses, relaxed, strolling doctors, and pained, whimpering patients. The sights, sounds and smells, bring Skyler back to when he was 6, and Officer Bob took him to the hospital, as soon as the other cops showed up, to the crime scene, just to make sure Sky was OK.

Other cops and medics offered to take Skyler. But he was so traumatized by what he'd seen, through the keyhole in the trunk of his Father's car, that he screamed and kept running away, calling for his Dad and Officer Bob, until finally they realized that-- other than his Dad-- Officer Bob was the only other cop-- or adult-- that Sky would trust and go with.

The hospital air was so cold, 6-year-old Sky's teeth chattered, as the smell of sickness and alcohol astringent made him both nauseous and nervous. He cried to himself, wondering why no one told him where his Mommy and big brother were, as he waited for his Dad to come find him. Still wondering why his Father wasn't there to save them.

No one would tell him-- *anything*.

His Dad was policing a big NFL football game, an hour away, at a giant stadium packed with people, making it hard for him to be notified of what happened. So Sky focused on the beeping sounds of the medical machines, around him, to anchor him back down to sanity, as he held on tight to his Mom's key chain, rubbing the big white Cross.

He hears beeping sounds again, as he and Shyanne burst into Lissette's hospital room. They stop short, to see.

Steven and Nathan are playing cards on Lissette's long, wheeled, wood-paneled, meal table, over by the window, which is across from the door, in front of Sky and Shy...

Hadji is sleeping in a burgundy red recliner, by the wall, right next to the door, beside Sky and Shy...

Zack is sitting in a chair, in the middle of the room, between them all, in front of Lissette's bed, staring in a seemingly fixated trance, at the flat screen TV, on the wall up above him. He flips through the channels with the remote, in between chomping on a bag of chips, and absentmindedly peeling at the big sticker on the bottom of his shoe.

And Lissette sleeps with giant bruises on her face. Her blingy Cross earrings are dimmed, by the dirt that she fell face first into, when the shovel of a stalker knocked her unconscious.

Shyanne gasps at her condition, covering her mouth-- and causing her dangly, shimmering, Cross bracelet to jingle softly. Skyler rushes over to Lissette-- shaken by fearful concern.

Steven and Nathan shoot them both venomous looks, as Sky looks up at them, and at Zack-- who stays focused on the screen up above him, like he's playing an important game--

The game of trying to find something interesting on TV.

"What happened?" Sky's voice wavers a little weakly, as he looks between them, with glistening eyes-- desperate for information.

"Valentine Killer." Zack's voice is so quick and casual, as he gapes at the TV screen, popping chips into his mouth-- like this whole crazy situation, has already become so old hat-- he's bored by it now.

Which only makes Skyler feel worse, for missing everyone's messages on his phone.

Then again--

--Zack could get bored by a rabid mountain lion, charging him, at full speed, with a pink polar bear dancing on its back, in a cyclone of cosmic purple flames, so--

That really wasn't saying much.

However--

The cold, hard, death stares on Steven and Nathan's faces--

--*spoke volumes.*

Steven stops playing his card game with Nathan to shoot an angry glare at Skyler so fierce, and uncharacteristic of his painfully sheepish nature, Skyler starts to wonder if Steven really is a shy guy--

--*or if it's really just an act.*

"What happened to YOU?" He lights into Skyler, "Lisette gets attacked by a serial killer, and we call you all night and all morning about it, and we don't hear back from you, until you show up randomly, with the crazy prophet girl that you're trying to mate with? What the hell, Sky?"

"Whoa. Somebody's on their period." Zack laughs goofily.

"Shut up, Zack." Steven snaps at him.

"YOU shut up, dude." Zack smirks with a surprised but amused grin, as if he was caught off guard by Steven's sudden spark of confident social aggression-- but he's getting a kick out of it.

"She's not crazy. Don't talk about her like that." Skyler shakes his head firmly at Steven, and grabs Shyanne's hand ostentatiously, to send Steven a nonverbal message, that she's off limits now.

--That she's one of them now.

--Whether he likes it or not.

Shyanne feels heartwarmed by the gesture, but still looks down, uncomfortably, suddenly feeling out of place. Like she just walked into a private family fight, that just so happens to be their most epic fight of the century. --And she hasn't even been formally introduced yet. Oh, and also--

Who the hell was he calling CRAZY??

“And I’m sorry, OK? My phone was off. I just got your texts and missed calls, right before I called you all, and Zack was the only one who bothered to pick up the friggin’ phone, and tell me what room Lissette was in.”

“Gee I wonder why.” There’s an irately mocking tone in his voice, “Maybe cause you ditched us, and then ignored us, when an emergency crisis dropped bombs on us, like we weren’t even a 2nd thought to you. Now you know how it feels, when you hit a wall of silence, after being really freaked out.”

Clearly, he has never been locked in a trunk, on the side of the road, at 6-years-old, feeling so freaked out, after hearing the loud, popping gunfire, from a wolfpack of mostly muscular, uniformed men, who he was raised to believe, were hired to serve and protect him-- or at least not murder him-- followed by the forever-haunting dead silence, of his big brother, and then his only Mother-- no longer moving-- that he bit himself into tasting blood.

And also--

“Emergency crisis?”

--Isn’t that, like, redundant and repetitive?

Meh.

“And Zack’s the only one of us, who you really give a damn about any way. So maybe that’s why, he was the only one, who picked up his phone.”

Zack suddenly breaks his TV trance to glance curiously at them all, raising his eyebrows, with a pleasantly surprised look of playful inquiry.

“Oh come on, Steven, you know that’s not true. Stop being so mellow-dramatic.” But Sky could see why Steven might think that. Zack was his best friend since early childhood. Zack was his best friend even before he met Lissette.

--Zack was his best friend even before his Mom and brother died.
But Zack wasn't the only friend he cared about.
That accusation wasn't fair--
--or true.

"Oh whatever." Steven rolls his eyes in angry disgust, "None of this woulda happened to Lissette, if you hadn't dumped us all last night, just to chase after a girl. You coulda just brought Repunzal to Geek Nite, ya know. It woulda saved Lissette a lot of ugly bruises and serious pain."

"Yeah OK, Steven." Sky nods with biting sarcasm, "This is all my fault. It's all my fault that The Valentine Killer attacked Lissette, and ruined our city, and scared you crapless. That's all my fault. I get it. My apologies to you, for what somebody-- who aint got CRAP to do with me-- did to you. I see how that's my fault. And I will work hard to improve it in the future."

Zack chuckles at Skyler's interpersonal satire-- but Steven looks incensed by it-- and Nathan has suddenly become Switzerland-- the pinnacle of neutral and uninvolved.

"By the way, Shyanne Valentine, these are my best friends--" Skyler points to each of them, "Zack O'Neal, Nathan Hendrick, Steven Chang, Hadji Singh-- who, apparently, didn't answer his phone, because he was *SLEEPING*, not because he was *MAD* at me-- *STEVEN*--" Sky throws his shruggishly scandalized friend Steven a challengingly knowing look, "--and Lissette Lopez." He nods to sleeping Lissette, "Guys-- you remember Shy."

"I remember." Steven's voice is suspicious, but he doesn't dare meet Shyanne's eyes with it, as he resumes playing cards with Nathan, "The girl you thought was The Valentine Killer. Before Lissette got whacked in the chrome dome with a yard-work tool. Whad you bring her here to finish the job?" His voice is biting.

Shyanne folds her arms, staring at Steven-- daring him to look her in the eye and say that. But of course he doesn't.

--And he never would.

Zack scoffs, "Oh please Steven. Ya should be glad Sky has an alibi this time. Now you can stop wondering if HE'S The Valentine Killer."

Now suddenly it's Skyler's turn to be personally offended, "*What?* You-- you thought *I* was--?"

"What?" Steven suddenly looks laughably sheepish, "That-- That's not what I said..." He sort of mumbles...

Zack snorts, "Oh that's EXACTLY what you said. In fact, you even brought up how we've never met Skyler's Martial Arts Trainer, Mentor Yogi, and how that could really be a made-up person all this time, that Skyler just uses as a fake alibi and cover, to commit his crimes, so his time away from us doesn't look suspicious, while he's out killing people, as The Valentine Killer."

"*WHAT??!!*" Skyler glares in betrayed shock at Steven.

Now Steven looks extremely ashamed at Skyler-- and extremely irate at Zack, for snitching on him so casually and thoroughly, "Well it's just-- I remember when you broke up with Theresa. It was shortly after we met. You didn't have fond memories of her. You resented her for the way she-- treated you.

"And how bad she made you feel about yourself, by icing you out. Now all the sudden you miss her? And corral us all to go to her house to hug her Mom? It just seemed like-- the actions of somebody, who felt guilty for something they did."

The shocked, offended awe in Sky, is visceral, "THAT-- *THAT'S* the only reason you put me on a serial killer suspect list? Cause I felt bad about the death of someone I knew? And had the decency to bring her Mother a meat basket? Are you kidding me, Steven?"

“Well-- I mean-- It’s not just that. You-- Dude. You black out sometimes and-- you don’t remember *anything*.”

Shy suddenly eyes Skyler fearfully and looks down-- remembering his, “all zoned out and trippy” trance, back in Brook’s panic room, that turned the whole place upside down, during his unconscious state.

And it unsettles her.

“Right.” Zack nods coolly, “But Sky was with Shy, before Papa Bear came home last night. And unless they fell asleep together or something-- she can account for his whereabouts-- when Lissette got bonked upside the head. --Right, Miss Valentine?”

Shy gulps, thinking. She fell asleep, cuddled in Skyler’s arms, last night. For all she knows-- he could have left and come back. They were knocked out for a couple hours. He had more than enough time.

Sky looks at her, nervously and knowingly-- fully aware that they’re thinking the exact same thoughts.

But Shyanne can’t find it in herself to consider such a horrendous, disturbing, and psychotic charge, of the only guy she’s ever felt so good about. And he needs her to have his back right now, the way he’s had her back all day and weekend. So hesitantly--

--She nods, “Yea-- yeah. He-- he’s innocent.”

“See?” Zack grins cheerfully, “There ya go. Blessing in disguise. I mean, sure. Lissette had to take a shovel to the face. But it was worth it, to know-- that our best buddy-- is not a murderer.”

Skyler gulps, happy Shyanne believes in his innocence-- but disturbed by the fact that he’s not sure he does. Steven looks down and nods at Zack’s words-- shamed and guilty.

Zack blows his lips like a raspberry, “Blah. I’m bored. There’s nothing on TV. Nathan, gimme your bluetooth. I wanna call China. They owe us some money, right?”

Steven and Nathan both shoot Zack a dirty look.

Zack just shrugs back at them, “What? You wear it to look cool but it’s not like we ever see you use it.”

Nathan just ignores him, annoyed. Zack nods, conceding.

“OK. What about your oxygen tank? You can go a few minutes without extra air, right? I wanna see how long it takes me to hit nirvana.”

“I gotta take a leak--” Steven throws his cards down, disgusted by everything and everyone.

Zack snorts, “Don’t fall in and disappear into the land of Narnia, like Nathan does. Though I gotta admit, it was kind of hilarious, watching the skeleton staff go crazy last night, trying to figure out which bathroom his wheels got stuck in, hahaha.” Zack busts out laughing at the thought.

Steven’s had it, and slams his fist down on the table, “Dude-- *SERIOUSLY*-- *Why do ya always have to keep making fun of Nathan all the time?* It’s not cool. It’s annoying. How would you like it if somebody was always making fun of YOU?”

“Sorry-- Jeeze. It was just a joke.” Zack gapes at Steven’s hyper sensitive upset, “Don’t get your panties in a bunch, Martha. Gosh.”

Wounded Nathan glares back at Zack-- and then turns his eyes to Skyler, curiously, “You guys look like...”, he takes a deep, labored breath, “You been through hell...”, he takes a deep, labored breath, “What happened?”, he takes a deep, labored breath.

“Holy hell-- Sky-- Is that *your Dad?*” Zack’s voice is suddenly serious and alarmed.

They all look up at the TV screen, to see Detective Sirius Stone’s photo image on the news, under the caption: “Suspected Valentine Killer Caught”. Skyler and Zack gawk in horror, Shyanne and Steven stare in confusion, Nathan furrows his brow in stunned disturbance, and Hadji and Lissette just continue sleeping.

The TV Reporter states, “In an astonishing turn of events in The Valentine Killer Case, Major Case Detective Sirius Stone, was just arrested for the Valentine murders, after DNA matching his, was found in the crime scene lab results today.”

Everyone looks at Sky. Sky steps backward, in disoriented disbelief, suddenly rubbing his pants pocket again, as his fingers search unsuccessfully for the big, thick, old, white, wooden Cross that belonged to his Mother.

--The Cross that is no longer there.

“Sky--” Shyanne puts her hand on his arm, but he cuts her off before he can hear any of her words of console-- words that he just can’t fathom right now.

“Zack-- Take care of Shy.” He nods knowingly at Zack.

Zack nods knowingly back, but wants more to go on than just that, “OK but why? Where are *YOU* going?”

“Yeah, where are *YOU* going, Skyler? You can’t just leave me here.” Shy’s extremely displeased by this.

“I’m sorry, angel. You’re not safe around me. And-- you know it.” Skyler shoots her a knowing look, turns-- and runs out of the hospital room.

The door slams shut, and suddenly wakes Hadji up with a jump.

“HUH? HMM? WHAT HAPPENED? WHAD I MISS? DID I WIN?”

Shyanne looks at confused Hadji, then at Zack, who shrugs with a humorously nervous, friendly, and welcoming wave hello to her.

She huffs.

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ACT III: PART 3 - OFFICER LOEHMAN

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CHAPTER

[38]

MEET THE PUPPETMASTERS

Dad! Dad! WHERE'S MY Dad?!"

The cops immediately rush to stop and block a frantic Skyler, as he races into the busy, faded, gray-blue police station, and tries to get past the barricade of uniformed arms, that keep distance between him and his Dad's office-- which, from where he's standing, does in deed, look empty.

An unnatural feeling suddenly hits Sky.

This isn't right.

Something is sickeningly wrong.

And he knows *what* it is.

He even knows *who* it is.

He knows its *The Gods of The Universe Psycho Factory WAG Cult*. --But he also knows, he doesn't know *how* to explain that, or moreover-- *who* he could trust, *who* wasn't a part of it. His mind is racing and he can't focus clearly--

"HE'S INNOCENT! HE DIDN'T DO IT! MY DAD IS NOT THE VALENTINE KILLER!"

"Oh? Is that so? And you have *evidence* of this?"

The sinister voice sends chills up Skyler's spine. But not as much as the ice cold glare that follows it, when he looks over at the speaker-- flaxen-haired, frozen-eyed, Officer Slager.

Why weren't more people afraid of this guy?

Just look at him.

He's scary.

Look into his eyes.

There's nothing there...

--But death.

--And pure *evil*.

"Yeh-- Yes. I-- I have evidence." Distrusting Skyler stutters out a bit nervously.

Skyler was always a confident soul. But now-- all the sudden-- he has been reset by the mere presence of Slager. Reset to age 6. Now, all he can feel is the pain he causes himself, when he keeps compulsively biting the inside of his mouth.

--Like he did when he was 6.

"Well then. Let's have a talk." Slager stares at him with his arctic eyes and powerfully brawny, folded arms.

But Sky's not completely reset. He's learned *something* from his youth--

"I only want to talk to Officer Bob and Agent Diaz." Skyler stares back at Slager like he's not afraid, but secretly, on the inside--

--He's *terrified*.

He wonders if the nervous twitch in his face is giving him away. Or the gulp in his throat. Or the shake in his hand.

Could Slager smell his fear?

Cause Skyler was certain, any beast in the wild could.

And Slager was certainly a beast.

Slager rolls his eyes with a shrug, “Well they’re still back there, in the room, interrogating a new suspect. Go spill all your secrets to them... *lil killah*.”

Skyler stares at Slager apprehensively, with a confused twitch of his brow, as Slager eyes him ominously, and nods at the cops to let Sky pass through. They all move apart to open up and let him go by.

Whoa, Skyler thinks. *That was too easy*.

And he’s about to find out why...

As Sky runs toward the interrogation room, Slager nods darkly at another cop, to join him, and they both follow an unknowing Skyler back there, down the florescent-lit white-noise-colored hallway, toward the dull, dreary, questioning quarters, tucked away in the back--
--where no one can hear you scream.

Or--

--see you die.

Shouting Sky bursts into the empty, stuffy interrogation room-- the same room his Father questioned Mr. Callahan in.

“OFFICER BOB! AGENT DIAZ! YOU--”

But he stops short, realizing no one is there. He turns quickly, to leave-- but of course, he’s faced with Slager and his flunky cop, who quickly-- and sinisterly-- block him, as they enter through the doorway, making him step back, away from them, automatically on reflex.

“Ya goin’ somewhere there, *lil killa*?” Slager stares hard into Skyler’s cautiously panicked eyes, with a wicked, taunting, and unnervingly knowing grin, “Had any-- good *naps*-- lately?”

The eerie smirk on both their faces, makes Skyler bite the inside of his mouth harder.

But his Dad trained him for emergencies back when he was 7. So, to some degree, he came respectfully prepared.

Just as his Father taught him, he inconspicuously pulls his phone out, behind his back, and pushes the hard, smooth, plastic button on his wide, thin smartphone-- The Emergency Speed Dial Text that he programmed-- with that tricked out addition of his map coordinates tracing app. So each Speed Dial Text sends someone he trusts his exact location, with the words, "911! DANGER! EMERGENCY! SEND HELP NOW!"

--#1 texts his Dad-- who-- obviously was unavailable.

--#2 texts Agent Diaz-- who-- was usually somewhere in the general vicinity of his Dad.

--#3 texts Officer Bob-- who-- while not always close by, always knew how to get in touch with his Dad and Agent Diaz-- or could send someone he trusted, who was closer. Although, that wasn't entirely saying much, since, well, he trusted Officers Thomas, Pantaleo, Loehman, and all the other villains too.

--And we see how well that turned out. --Officer Bob was a good person-- but not the most sensitive or intuitive soul...

--#4 texts Mentor Yogi-- who-- might be in a class with one of his students, and not get the message til later, but if by chance he sees it now, he'll call for special help, and possibly show up, with a whole fleet of former student ninjas, from training sessions past, by his side-- all ready to kick butt and take names, like a tight team of professional samurais-- epic ninjutsu style.

Or maybe that was Skyler's secret ninja fantasy working overtime.

--#5 texts Zack-- who knew who to call-- and how to get to Skyler fast-- and would have no qualms about grabbing his Dad's gun, shooting a dirty cop to save his best friend, and going out in a big, bright, blaze of glory together, that people would remember and talk about, for years to come, after their kickass death. And when Sky thought about it, to be honest-- *Zack was a little crazy...*

...And predictably unpredictable.

--#6 texts Lissette-- who might forget to call for help, but would likely show up with her 4 colossally big-boned brothers-- and a handful of baseball bats-- ready to throw down.

--#7 texts Steven-- who probably wouldn't show up to help him fight off the bad cops, but would quickly get help for him.

--#8 texts Nathan-- who would struggle through his malady to call for help, but obviously couldn't show up or do much of anything himself, because of his physical limitations.

--#9 texts Hadji-- who's usually too wrapped up in a video game to even notice when his phone goes off.

--#0 texts 911, which wouldn't matter if The Gods of The Universe had plants there, who would intercept and block his call for help.

And #11 group text messages everyone on that list.

Skyler dials #11 to group text everyone, and realizes briefly to himself, that-- should he get out of this room alive-- maybe he should add a new speed dial number to his phone-- for Shyanne. But just as fast as the thought hits him, he rethinks it.

No. She would definitely show up.

--And she would probably get killed.

Sky snaps out of his phone-focused haze of secretly calling for help, when Slager's Flunky Cop slams and locks the interrogation room door. Skyler bites down even harder on the inside of his mouth, as his fingers search the outside of his dark blue jeans pocket desperately-- and again unsuccessfully-- for his Mother's Cross. So he quickly looks at the 2-way mirror, hopefully-- but pessimistically.

"Whew-- What are you doing?" He sounds like a frightened little 6-year-old again.

Why does he sound like a frightened little 6-year-old again?

"Why-- Waiting to see the evidence you have, to save your Father, of course, Mr. Stone. You do have it, don't you?" Slager folds his arms again, and gazes icily into Skyler.

Sky stares at the two bad guys, backing up, as they slowly ease toward him.

“You know the GOOD cops and FBI agents are watching you from in there right now, right? I saw them go in.”

“You saw nothing. And Officer Bob and Agent Diaz are the only people you can trust-- and neither of them are here today. Luck be a genius tonight. So I suggest you stick to inventing your little geek whiz programs kid. Cause lying-- is not your specialty.”

Skyler makes sure to maintain a table's distance from them as the table separates them from him. But he knows, that at any second, they could split up and corner him. And if he pulls out the rusted, old, creepy underground steak knife from his pocket, to defend himself from them-- or even just throws his sunglasses at them, to distract them while he runs away-- he'd only be giving them, what their above-board law enforcement peers would consider “justifiable cause”, to shoot and kill him. So he tries another approach--

--Delay and agitate them into making a scene, so that somebody will hear them, and come in, before they murder him.

“You know my Dad's innocent. You framed him for your crimes.”

Slager laughs, sincerely amused, “Oh-- You-- You think *WE* are The Valentine Killer? Heh! That's rich. We're dangerous, kid. *DEADLY* dangerous. But we are *NOT*-- The Valentine Killer.”

Skyler gets the feeling that this might be the one thing Slager is telling the truth about.

“But you know who is. You may not *know* you know. But you know. Maybe one of the kids your little John Wayne Gacy Psycho Factory took from Saint Valentine Orphanage, grew up to be a real hum dinger. Maybe she's lookin for some payback for all the hell you put her through.”

“Or him.” Slager shrugs casually.

“Is it a him?” Sky wants to see if he knows.

But he doesn't seem to.

"How the hell should I know? But a question for you. Since you know so much about *other* people's business-- that you *shouldn't*. How much do you know about your *own* business-- that you *should*? About the things you do when you black out? About the cover-ups certain people have made-- for *you*? --About FBI Agent Maria Diaz's relationship to you and your Father?"

Skyler looks confused, "Wha, --what are you-- talkinna-- ...bout?"

"Well you know so much about others. Whado ya know about you? And Daddy Stone? And Agent Diaz?"

"Either spit it out, or let me go." Sky glares, annoyed.

The cops glance at each other, and laugh haughtily together.

"Well well well. Look who grew a nice big pair a balls in 10 years. All that blind bravery and no grasp on reality. So you know about The Valentine Killer. The "Psycho Factory" WAG Club. But you don't know about the cover-up? Setup by your pops and agent Diaz? To protect you? From going to prison-- for murder?"

Skyler scoffs, disbelieving, "*WHAT?*"

Slager laughs, shaking his head, "All that genius in your brain and you can't remember when you kill someone? Here you are lookin' scared a us, when we should be scared a you."

"Bull crap. You're messing with me."

"Oh and guess we're "*bull crapping*" you about the secret affair that your Dad and Diaz have been havin' for the past 2 years? Planning to get married once he joins her ranks up top? We made that up too?"

Sky thinks, confused, unsure, then shakes his head, "No, he-- he woulda-- told me-- He-- He wouldn't have kept that from me."

Slager sneers, "Kid, I admit. You are the most entertaining oversight that we have ever underestimated. A fascinating mistake that never ceases to amuse me. But as mystifying of a blunder as you are-- you are a blunder none-the-less..."

“One that is becoming increasingly less and less amusing. --One that we should never have left alive, 10 years ago.

“So the good news is-- you’re a genius to the world. But the bad news is-- you’re a loose end to us. And, genius or not-- loose ends-- must-- be cut.” Slager gestures scissors with his hand, “Tough luck, kid. Looks like those heroes you been waiting for-- they’re not comin’. This is monster ville-- and we rule this town.”

Skyler narrows his eyes at Slager, “Monsters never reign forever. David beat Goliath to the ground.”

Slager throws him a discomfited smirk, “Aw, how sweet. Lil Detective Stone Jr. echoing the expired sentiments of Daddy Stone. We’ll let pops know you quoted him, before you died.”

“If you touch me they’ll see it on the interrogation room video. And hear it on the audio recording. And you’ll be executed by lethal injection before you can say, “*OOPS!* Guess we’re not the *GODS OF THE UNIVERSE* after all”.

“Funny thing about technology--” Slager smiles darkly at him, “As valuable a resource as it is-- it can almost always be manipulated by anyone-- to reflect whatever either party wants to see. Electronic data can always be made to appear a certain way, to make a person see what they want them to see. Like if evidence-- “*loses*”-- the interrogation room video, and all they have left is a small, but damning, excerpt of the audio. It can make a suspect look-- *really* guilty. Kinda like this--”

Both cops start throwing chairs, and things from the table, all around the room, shouting in fake, terrified fear, and professional upset.

“STOP RESISTING ARREST! RESTRAIN HIM! HE GOT YOUR GUN! HE GOT A GUN! SUSPECT ARMED AND DANGEROUS! TAKE HIM OUT! TAKE HIM OUT! NOW! NOW! NOW! NOW!”

“HELP! BOB! DIAZ! HELP ME! HELP!” Sky BANGS on the door as both cops PULL THEIR GUNS OUT ON HIM, SHOUTING at him.

Sky chomps down hard on the inside of his mouth, and feels the dull, metallic tang of bright, red blood, dribble out into his teeth and tongue, as he sees FLASHBACKS of his Mom, big brother, and Officer Pantaleo, out on the side of the road, through the keyhole of his trunk.

It all gets foggy as BAM BAM BAM! --Agent Diaz shoots the door open with her gun, and BREAKS IN, YELLING LOUDLY, with her firearm drawn on the cops, before they shoot Sky--
--who falls to the ground with a giant THUD--
--Passed out.

CHAPTER

[39]

MEET SKYLER'S KILLER SECRET

Skyler? Skyler. --*SKY!!*”

Skyler snaps out of his daze and awakens his mind to a new environment. He looks to the side to see the glistening gold Cross necklace around Agent Diaz’s neck, as she sits next to him, in her car, in front of a rural gas station, out in the boondocks, somewhere in no-man’s-land.

If he thought the busy little transient city, that he grew up in was isolated-- that was *nothing* compared to *this* level of *complete* isolation. Were there *any* living souls *anywhere* within a *50 mile radius* of them? Sky looks around at his foreign surroundings, both groggy-- and utterly confused.

“What... What’s going on?” He sees the gun in her holster, and quickly sits up straighter, “Are you about to kill me now?”

Agent Diaz gazes sympathetically at him, “You really don’t remember, do you?”

He regards her coldly, “Are you framing my Dad for The Valentine Murders? Are you the one who planted his DNA at the crime scene?”

She stares at him in gaping awe, “Sky-- Your Dad is covering for *YOU*. Nobody’s *framing* him. Some DNA information was released, placing *YOU*, at the scene of the crime. So he took credit for it, saying that it was him, and not you.”

Skyler is unsure why, but her words upset him, “But-- I didn’t do it!”

She sighs, heavy-hearted, as if about to break to him, a tragedy that she wasn’t sure if he was prepared to handle yet, “You black out, Sky. You can kill people when you’re not conscious.”

Sky scoffs, shaking his head, “Oh don’t be ridiculous. Now you sound like Slager. They’re just looking for a fall guy. Get real. I’m not a killer, Diaz. I’m a nerd. I don’t kill, I never have, and I never would-- So why would I start now?”

Diaz eyes the outdoor restroom of the rural gas station, thinking hard, “Because you already did, Skyler. A month before The Valentine Murders started-- 8 months ago-- 10 Valentine Killer crime scenes ago. During one of your black outs. On a roadtrip. When you and Zack were coming back from some weekend tech convention.

“You ran into one of the cops who helped murder and-- torture-- your Mom and brother. You saw him trying to rape a teenager at a rural gas station-- *THIS* gas station. You fought him. You won. But you didn’t stop till he was dead.

“And you were in a daze. You weren’t yourself. You weren’t even-- conscious. The girl you saved saw Zack trying to reach you on your phone so she answered and told him what happened. He rushed in, saw it all, and called your Dad, telling him what happened.

“Your Dad called me. And we-- covered it up for you, Sky. We made it look like it never happened. Like he blew up in a car fire by accident.

“And I think Slager, or his people, had one of our private conversations about it bugged somehow, so that must be how he knows about it. Cause we sure as heck didn’t tell him.

“Skyler-- I love your Dad. And I love you. But you *are* capable of killing. And not knowing about it. You already did it. And it could have triggered something inside you.

“Maybe that’s why you’re doing these-- weird cult killings as The Valentine Killer. And I dunno, your Dad just feels bad about it all, I guess because he-- he feels like he failed you. So taking the wrap for you is-- his form of-- Fatherly Harry Carry or something--”

Skyler shakes his head, “Bull crap. You’re The Valentine Killer. You brought me here to gaslight me. To make me believe I did something I could never do. To take my suspicions off of you.”

She stares at him, shaking her head, “Sky--”

She puts her hand on his back, but Skyler jerks away from her abruptly, and she instantly grabs for her gun in fear, but doesn’t pull it out. He looks at it, then at her, then gets out of her car, and marches into the outdoor restroom. She looks down, in exhausted thought.

Sky angrily slams open the door of the outdoor bathroom, bops over to the sink, turns on the faucet water, rubs water on his face, and looks at himself in the mirror.

He sees his wet face and his trademark motorcycle sunglasses on his head. Then he pulls out his phone, and rereads the old Text Message, “FROM: Mentor Yogi-- To Overcome Loss, You Must Bear The Cross”, with an emoticon Cross. Skyler thinks about this, trying to understand what his trainer meant by that.

As he stares at the text, he absentmindedly taps the side of his jeans, compulsively looking for his Mother’s white wooden Cross again. Instead of that, his hand finds something else hard in his pocket.

He pulls out the creepy underground butcher knife from his pants, and gazes at it, curiously, lightly rubbing one of the flat sides of the blade with his fingers.

--Then-- he hears water drip from a sink. He looks at it. Then he hears the sound of a bell ring above the glass door of the gas station outside. He looks toward it, through the crack in the door. Then he hears the loud air conditioner blow from a vent. He looks at it and sees a red string tied to it flutter in the air. All the sights, sounds and senses, put together, bring him back to the day that it happened...

Same location-- Same sunglasses-- but 8 months ago...

As 16-year-old Skyler washed his hands at the stained, old, dirty white ceramic sink, he heard the water drip. Then he heard the sound of a bell ring above the glass door of the gas station outside. Then he heard the loud, dirty, wall AC blow out air, and he looked over at it.

He saw the red string that was tied to the vent, flutter in the air. He walked over toward the old air conditioner, and grabbed some paper towels to dry his hands. He looked down, below the towelling dispenser, and he saw a dull, silver, metal wire, poking out of the trash can.

Then, suddenly, the restroom door slammed open behind him, on the other end of the small room, and he heard a frantic girl screaming desperately for help, as drunk, red-faced, Officer Loehman dragged the struggling, olive-complected teen in, by a fistful of her long, thick, dark, Mediterranean hair.

Skyler didn't know if the girl was Greek or Italian. All he knew was that he looked directly into Loehman's eyes, through the restroom sink mirror to his right, and right away, Loehman scowled arrogantly at Sky-- clearly not recognizing him, as the 6-year-old car trunk survivor, whose Mother and brother he helped to violate, snuff out, and steal away from him forever.

“Who you eyein’ nigger? Get out!” He snapped at him, as if he’d threatened many others before, countless times, and just assumed, that purely out of fear, Skyler would submit, and run out of the bathroom like a coward, letting this pathetic excuse for a man, rape this poor girl.

Like they did his Mother.

Sky just stared at him, flashing back to him 10 years ago-- through the keyhole of his trunk. Loehman dragged the screaming, crying girl into a handicap stall... --and punched her into submission. Then he turned her around, pinned her down, facing her to the ground, and he handcuffed her to the rails.

Skyler could smell the sharp, noxious odor, of Loehman’s sticky sweat and toxic alcohol, swamp up the whole room.

He reeked.

As he unbuckled his pants, Skyler grabbed the hard, thin, jagged, dark gray, metal wire from the trash can, snuck up behind Loehman, lifted it over his head, and yanked it tight around his neck-- squeezing his poisonous, wet flesh, until he could squeeze no further.

The dirty cop let go of his pants immediately, dropping the handcuff keys over by the girl, and he quickly grabbed at his neck, flailing his arms around at it, as he suffocated.

Then he grabbed for his gun, and tried-- but failed-- to shoot at the ceiling-- unable to reach his real target-- Skyler-- whose eyes were completely tranced out.

The girl rushed to grab the keys, quickly unlocking her handcuffs, as the 2 of them struggled together. Finally, Loehman weakened-- his eyes bulged-- and he collapsed--

--Dead on the floor.

And Sky began talking-- chanting-- as if hypnotized-- as he clutched his Mother’s wilting, white, wooden Cross key chain in his hands tight-- just like he did when he was 6.

“You are not God. You will never be God. Only God is God. My Lord Jesus is God. And my God will comfort me in heaven as he sends you all straight to hell. Rapist. Coward. Murderer. You’re the devil’s bitch. Rapist. Coward. Murderer. You’re the devil’s bitch.”

As Sky repeated himself, entranced, rocking back and forth, and gripping his Mother’s Cross firmly in his palm-- the crying, scared, beaten girl slowly eased over to him, crouching down to him, and she saw his glazed gaze. She looked over at now-deceased Loehman, then back at Skyler, and she touched his arm gently.

He jumped back, looking upset, repeating his Mother’s words faster and louder. She pulled back from him instantly, raising her hands up, and nodded at him, giving him his space, as he looked toward her, and his eyes fell on a Cross tattoo on her ivory ankle.

The girl saw his phone ring on the floor, so she picked it up, and saw a text from Zack, “Hey dude. I got the chips and soda! Hurry up! I’m growin’ a beard out here!” She texted Zack back, “Your friend needs your help in here”.

A few seconds later, Zack rushed into the bathroom, and saw Skyler rocking back and forth, by the dead rapist cop and the beat up looking teen girl.

But Zack looked a lot less surprised than he should have. Then he crouched down to look at Skyler, watching his entrancement, as Sky chanted his Mother’s words, repeatedly. Zack looked back at the crying, beat up teen girl.

“What happened?”

“The cop, he-- he pulled me over for speeding-- Beat me up and-- he tried to rape me. Your friend-- he-- he saved my life.”

Zack looked back at Sky, nodded at this, and held his hand for Skyler’s phone. She gave it to him, and he quickly called Sky’s Dad.

“Mr. Stone? Hi, yeah, it’s Zack. We have a problem. Sky went into another one of his trips. We-- We need your help.”

Suddenly Skyler snaps out of it, seeing flashes of Theresa, and he falls to the ground, dropping the creepy underground skull blade to the floor, lost in anguished tears, as he realizes, realistically now-- that *he--*
--could be The Valentine Killer.

Sky walks back to the car outside, with his dark black and orange sunglasses now hiding his eyes, and he startles Diaz as he opens the passenger seat door, gets in, stares forward, and looks resolved, as her Cross glimmers in the sunlight.

“I remember. --Everything.” He says simply.

She stares back at him for a beat, and nods, relieved, “Good. --Now we can move forward.”

She starts the car--

--and they drive away...

CHAPTER

[40]

MEET THE LAST CALL FOR HOPE

Agent Diaz pulls up to the curb, beside Skyler's front yard, which is packed with cop cars everywhere, as loud, chattering police exit his house, carrying big, black, hard plastic bins, full of stuff in their arms-- including all of Sky's computer equipment. Skyler jumps out of the car, trying to stop them, as he yanks his sunglasses off in disbelief.

"HEY! STOP! WHAT ARE YOU DOIN?! THAT'S MY STUFF!! YOU CAN'T TAKE THAT!!!"

Officer Bob exits Sky's house holding a big box of equipment in his hands, as he walks Skyler's dog beside him, by his leash. The metallic dog tag glares with Einstein's name and a Cross on it.

"They got a warrant, so they're seizing it all. Said they also need to test Einstein's hair and paw prints to see if they match something from the crime scene." He nods downward, at Sky's soft, fluffy snow dog, with his electric blue eyes, "I'll be sure to keep him safe and bring him home with me tonight, until they're done with him-- And I'll try to keep your stuff in tact. Sorry about your Dad, Skyler."

Huh. A horrifically gruesome tragedy and a decade later, have really matured Officer Bob's interpersonal, sensitivity-communication skills with people.

Or at least with Skyler.

Guess learning who those 2 innocent victims were over in that ditch, back when 19-year-old Bob helped 6-year-old Skyler escape the trunk of that car-- made Officer Robert Buble' stop merely mechanically going through the motions, like a robot, without actually *caring* or *feeling* anything for the people he was dealing with-- as he started getting use to other people-- actually understanding what other people were going through-- and realizing that other people weren't all that different, or far removed from him.

But regardless of Officer Bob's notable communal improvement, Skyler looks dangerously rattled and over edge, at the chaos that's going on in his house, and he runs inside, to see if he can salvage anything, before these clumsy bulls destroy his China shop.

So Sky runs into his bedroom--

--and he sees that *everything* electronic is *GONE*. His jaw drops to the floor, and he just falls to the ground, as if his heart has been ripped out of his chest.

Sitting in the same position, from sun till moon, with his sunglasses on his head, Sky listens to Lecrae's rap song "Walk With Me" featuring Novel, on his iPod, as he ignores all his incoming texts and calls, from Zack, Steven, Nathan, Hadji, Agent Diaz, Officer Bob, and others. He even ignores Shyanne. He ices *everyone*, incapable of speaking to *anyone*.

All he can process, is that his house now smells like stirred up dust, and he can still taste a bit of blood in his mouth, from compulsively biting himself.

Like he did when he was 6.

Though, after applying some pain reliever gel, in Agent Diaz's car, after they stopped by a convenient store, on the way home-- the pain has finally started to subside.

Skyler feels at a deep loss, as his habitual fingertips, reach fruitlessly for his Mother's old, white-painted, wooden Cross again, over by the side of his pants pocket.

--Where is it?

--Why couldn't he find it?

The police turned his house upside down, removed giant electronic equipment out and everything-- and yet, Skyler still couldn't find his Cross-- ANYWHERE.

It's not here, Skyler realizes.

But then where is it?

Who has it?

Unable to cope with his lost Cross, he replaces it with the old, rusted steak knife that he and Shyanne discovered in that creepy underground tunnel of skulls, as he pulls it out of his pocket, and rubs the blade of it, for a bit. Then he realizes there's an inscription on the blade. He wipes off the excess reddish brown grit and grime on the blade, with the inside bottom of his shirt, and reads it out loud.

"Always Constant-- Shift Control To The Year of The GOTU."

Sky thinks about that a moment, with a furrowed brow.

"Strange inscription." He admires the blade's words for a bit longer.

Finally, after grimly accepting profound defeat, over just about everything, that he cares about in his life-- including his life itself-- Skyler looks at his cell phone--

--and he makes a phone call.

He hears Laura's cheerful, commanding voice, in a prerecorded greeting, "Hi! This is Laura! Leave me a message at the beep! --*BEEP!*"

Sky sighs, hopelessly-- and speaks, "Hey Laura. I'm assuming you're alive, now that I've learned that the girl screaming in the back of my mind wasn't you." He realizes how that sounds.

“Err-- I mean, um-- she’s OK-- too. I-- uh-- saved her-- life-- and-- virtue-- it turns out. But, um-- ANY WAY--”, He huffs at himself for his unexpected verbal clumsiness and epic T-M-I blooper. Must be the hard-core fatigue, jumpy nerves, and clinical depression coming on...

“Laura-- I know we don’t know each other well. I mainly know you as the student lifeguard my best bud’s been in love with for 10 years. But-- This is Skyler Stone. The saxophone-playing tecky blackbelt from school and martial arts class. With the Dad who’s top detective on all major cases in the city.

“I don’t know if you been following the news, or, if you’ll even get this message-- or-- if you’re even still alive-- But-- they took away my whole life. They tried to murder me and my new girlfriend, Shy Valentine. They framed my Dad for murder, as The Valentine Killer-- planting fake evidence at a crime scene.

“They were tryna frame ME but my Dad took the fall. And they stole all my stuff today. All my original programs I invented and built up. My life’s work. Gone. Just like that. They even took my dog, makin’ up some fake lies to take him, just to rattle me. They’ll probably kill him too.”

Sky gulps tearfully, “Now they have all The Core 4 case files that Theresa gave me postmortem, of evidence she had on the bad guys-- who are now taking my last living parent away from me. It’s all gone too. Into the hands of the criminals that it incriminates.

“And they still plan to kill me, my Dad, probably, all my friends, and my girlfriend. And all their families. To erase loose ends. These people are powerful. Insane. And scary. And I know you know they killed The Core 4. And how they killed Theresa. I-- I know you have the video of what really happened that night.” He sighs tiredly as the song on his iPod changes to Derek Minor’s “Save Me” featuring J Paul.

“And once you saw it, or your Dad saw it, he got you and your family out. You all, high tailed it to some remote cabin in the woods somewhere. I get it. You’re scared. We all are.

“But by hiding the truth with you, so *YOU* can hide from the supervillain powers that be, to protect *yourselves*, you left a lot of good people behind who are now gonna die a... hellish, dishonorable death, after smear campaigns slander our names-- to make us enemies of the state.

Of humanity.

In the public’s eye.

Just so we take the fall for horrors somebody else did.

“Or maybe I did it. I dunno. I black out sometimes, and can’t remember crap. So maybe I’m the one you’re hiding from. Maybe you’re afraid of me. Maybe you think I’ll try to kill you like The Core 4. If I killed The Core 4. Which, at this point. I honestly have no idea if I did or not.

“But whether I’m the killer, or the cops are, or the richies are, or the WWW dot God Haters R Us are, whatever-- I don’t care who’s on the tape, Laura. But I know you have it. And I need you to release it. Online. On TV. As soon as you hear this. I know you’re scared. Me too.

“But we gotta do the right thing. We gotta be courageous, brave-- just stand up and do the right thing. Fight the good fight. Cause in all this, I’ve learned, how it’s time we all see-- that we are the heroes we been waiting for. This is OUR world. And it’s the job of us all to take down the villains who work so hard to destroy it. And us.

“Laura I see you take down grown men twice your size in karate class. Now I need you to join forces with me, with us, with self, with God, with the universe-- and do the right thing. Cause-- a smart cookie once told me that-- villains will always be villains. But the rest of us don’t have to be cowards who just stand by and watch.

“The best way to test the strength of your soul is to ask yourself: If society was made up of nothing but people who were just like me, would someone like Hitler fail or succeed? I’d like to think we’d kick the super villain off the cliff. Not follow him right off it. So please Laura. I’m counting on you. You’re our last final hope for survival and for truth.

“So please RELEASE THE VIDEO. Cause monsters never reign forever. Eventually they all go down. Team Good always wins the final battle. David beat Goliath to the ground. Now WE are the superheroes. This world belongs to US at the core. So get in the game. Fight back. Be the hero you been waiting for. Cause we were saved. And now it’s our job to save others. *What would Jesus do?*“

Sky hangs up, leans his head back against his wall, and sighs-- quietly praying to God, to make all this alright.

ACT IV: PART I - THE SECRET VIDEO

CHAPTER

[41]

MEET SKYLER'S ANGEL

It's late-- past midnight, when Skyler enters Lissette's socially silent, beeping hospital room, with its oxygen-shuffling, diagnostic machines, as he sports sunglasses on his forehead, and chews on a fresh stick of peppermint gum-- which is actually what helped train him to stop biting the inside of his mouth, back when he was 6.

Everyone is still here with Lissette: Zack, Hadji, Nathan-- and of course-- Steven. But they're all lounged around in chairs, sleeping-- and snoring. Even Shyanne is still here, fast asleep, curled up in a blanket, on the big red reclining chair.

Wait-- Shyanne's still here?

Why is Shyanne still here?

Skyler quietly steps over to her, and sees that she's listening to her iPod through Hadji's computer, with earbuds in her ears. He takes one out as she sleeps, puts it in his ear, listens, and hears Brandon Heath's country pop song "The Harvester". He looks curiously surprised by it.

Then he softly brushes his hand against Shyanne's satiny-but-chilly arm. She jumps, startled and scared, recklessly jerking both tranquilizer guns from Brook's safe room, out from under her big gray blanket, and into the air-- one in each hand-- like she's ready to shoot a villain.

Sky grabs groggy Shy's wrists gently, and puts a "ssh" to his lips, whispering to her. "Hey angel-- Sorry I had to bail on you earlier. My Dad's in trouble. And they tried to kill me again. That's why I left you here. Figured you'd be safer here than with me. I was right. But why didn't you go home? Zack coulda taken you."

Dazed, sleepy Shy blinks her eyes as she yawns, trying to wake up and focus on his words, as she recognizes him, and she puts her tranq guns back down on her lap, beside her pink-rimmed glasses, stretching her arms, to wake herself up. "What? Oh-- Yeah-- It's OK. I thought about it, but then I figured, these bad guys don't really know me or where I live, so if they're following me now, or tracking me somehow, why lead them straight back to my home?"

"It's bad enough they're after me too now. Don't want em to be after my Mom as well. Or have to hear her freak the heezy out at me in her classic volcanic panic, all like--"

She goes into a funny voice and face, "OH MY GOD SHYANNE YOU BROUGHT THEM HERE??? WHAT DID I TELL YOU ABOUT TRAIPSING AROUND CREEPY, DARK, SKULL-ENCUSTED, UNDERGROUND TUNNELS, WITH SEXY NERDS, AND THEN RESCUING A DESPERATE HORDE OF ABUSED RUNAWAY ORPHANS, OWNED BY PSYCHO KILLER CULTS! DIDN'T I TELL YOU NOT TO DO THAT!"

She flashes him a funny look, "So. Yeah. In addition to not bringing death to my Mother's doorstep, there was also the nagging. I'd rather face imminent death-- than to go back, and face that hysterically hyperbolic nagging."

She realizes, with a little nod, "And overbearingly violating invasiveness. And stressfully aggressive hypocrisy. And shamelessly manipulative control over every fiber of my being. And the embarrassing, social undermining, of my entire personal image and public identity."

She thinks about it for another beat, and looks at him, "--I fully intend to move out, as soon as humanly possible."

Sky gives her a laughing look, "Yeah all I heard in all that was 'Sexy Nerd'."

They both crack up laughing together, in hushed tones. Then Skyler nods, forcing a smile.

"But that was smart of you."

She nods, "Yeah, I guess. So we all thought you were a dead for a bit there, Sky. Til Zack got a hold of Officer Bob. He went to your house to check on you, tapping on your window, and then he told us you were just sitting there, in the dark.

"And when he asked if you were alright, you just nodded yes or something, and just waved for him to go. So he just sort of stayed parked outside your house all evening, to make sure you didn't hurt yourself or anything. Are you OK?"

Skyler nods, trying not to think about it.

Shy nods, seeing the pain on his face. Then she notices him absentmindedly and rhythmically tapping the side of his pocket again, where his Mother's Cross no longer is, and she looks down, now suddenly feeling his loss. So she asks him about the parent he still has, "What happened with your Dad?"

"Long story. Bad cops framing me as The Valentine Killer by planting evidence, so my Dad took the fall for me. Then I went home and found the police raiding my house. They took my dog and everything I've ever done. All my life's work. Gone.

"Along with Theresa's Core 4 case files. It's my fault. I thought backin' everything up on physical hard drives was good enough. Shoulda just kept my up-to-date online backup somewhere. But-- I never trusted those sites and didn't think I needed them enough to make one. My foolish fearlessness--"

Shy holds up a flash drive with a sky blue Cross sticker on it, linked to a neck chain. Sky eyes it, realizes it looks familiar, grabs it, and studies it. “Isn’t-- isn’t this one of my drives? The waterproof one I built to hold more space and transfer data faster? Like the one I gave to Theresa?”

“In deed it is...”, Smiling Shy pulls out Hadji’s laptop and plugs the flash drive in, as Lissette discretely wakes up and watches them, in silence, and the song on Shy’s iPod changes to Kirk Franklin’s funky Gospel jam “Revolution”.

Sky jolts in laughing awe, “Is that-- Hadji’s laptop? He never lets ANYONE touch that thing. For fear they’ll “mess up his games” or whatever.”

“Yeah, we gelled well playing a beginner games together, and he was cool. Especially after I told him, and everybody, about our harrowing adventure earlier. I think all your friends like me now. Even Steven came around. Begrudgingly. He didn’t like it when I made him laugh, at first.

“So he tried to give me the cold shoulder. Even got Nathan playing along. I think Steven just wants to remain righteously mad at us, in honor of Lissette’s tragic attack. But he eventually apologized for what he said earlier, and we had fun playing Uno and checkers.

Shyanne chuckles to herself, “In fact-- during the course of the day, I learned that Lissette has 4 brothers, and a divorced single Dad, who owns a mechanic shop.

“Steven has 3 sisters, and a divorced single Mom, who’s a math teacher, at a place called Secret Ridge Christian School. Hadji has 2 siblings-- a brother and a sister, --and both his parents are still happily married doctors.

“Zack has 1 brother, who’s like, 10 years older than him, and moved out when he was like, 8-- and his parents are still unhappily married divorce attorneys. --*Ironically*.

“And Nathan’s an only child, like me and you, but with parents who always go on vacation without him. Can’t be bothered with all his medical needs, whilst they get their groove on, I suppose.” She rolls her eyes spitefully at them.

“But you and I are the only ones whose parents are widows. Special club there. Any way-- we all actually started to have a good time--” She smiles hopefully-- but then her smile fades, tiresomely...

--until Zack made a crack about Lissette needing to take vocal lessons from my Mom, in one of her classes, and that kinda pissed her off. Cause apparently, she likes to sing, and was under the impression, that she was gonna get a record deal some day--

--and then when the boys found out I sing, they had me sing Amazing Grace, and they were all like whoa, and making a big deal of it-- and it kinda sent Lissette into a dark funk, and she kinda just stopped talking to everyone after that.

“I don’t think my presence here is beneficial to her recovery. She seems to view me as a threat in some way. *Every* way-- actually. --Any way-- this is--”

“How’d Lissette-- treat you?” Sky braces for the worst.

Shy clears her throat pleasantly, “Um, well, ya know. She mostly just wanted to know where you were. So everyone explained the situation with your Dad, and people trying to kill us, and well, she was just sorta ho-hum glum about it.

“Not sure what her feelings are, really. I don’t think she was too happy wakin’ up to see me here. But I’m not puttin’ my family in danger just cause someone doesn’t like me. So I stayed here any way. Amidst the frosty ice-- Ah! Here we go! Looks like everything was perfectly transferred!”

“What was transferred?”

Shy shows Sky the laptop screen. Sky clicks on the file, scans it visually, and his eyes widen.

“This-- this-- This is my work-- My-- programs-- The Core 4 evidence-- to save my Dad-- This is-- *everything*. You-- you saved it all? But, --*WHEN??*” He gawks at it, and her, in deliriously enamored disbelief.

She shrugs sweetly, “When I was alone in your room, the night we kissed, and your Dad was talking to you in the hall. Angels told me to protect all your data on an updated device that was less fragile than all of your various hard drives.”

“But-- I tried to save all my data on these drives before and-- it didn’t work.”

“I was guided to set up your folders a certain way in order for it all to properly transfer. And I had to do it manually for each data type. You just forgot to automate your universal serial busses first when you built and reformatted them. That’s why.”

“The angels taught you technology?” He gapes at her, laughingly awestruck.

“Oh, our technology is just the base level preschool knock-off of the much more highly sophisticated and inconceivable supernatural realm. Higher beings laugh at how linear our technology still is, over here on earth.”

“Higher beings?”

“You didn’t actually think we were the only intelligent life in this universe, did you? Of course, just like humans, there are good higher beings-- and bad. The bad ones can drive humans crazy. The good ones like us though. Maybe... they feel sorry for us... Our species *IS* rather *slow*. We--”

Sky abruptly hugs Shy tight, watery-eyed, as if dehydrated on a desert island, and she’s the majestic waterfall he tripped on by accident. She smiles and hugs him back, as a tear streams down his face.

“I love you, Shy Valentine.”

She giggles cheerfully as he sniffs back tears, “Back atcha babe--”

He can still catch a faint whiff of the sweet, sugary, vanilla scent on her neck, as he hugs her. He kisses her sweetly, making her smile. Then he kisses her passionately, enrapturing them both. Lissette twinges, seeing this. She knocks over an empty white foam cup from off her tray table, to break them up. They pull away abruptly, hearing the light sound, to see where it came from. But then, distracted again by each other, Sky eyes Shy, who bites her bottom lip, enamored by his kiss, wanting more.

“Told ya-- I’m like a beeper.”

“Never outdated-- always classic.” He laughs tearfully.

She laughs joyfully. He smooches her again and hugs her tight, in exhausted joy and relief. Lissette looks away, with a tear falling down her cheek. Sky hears a noise, looks up, and sees the doorknob jiggle from out in the hall. He swiftly moves toward the door to check it out, but bumps into Shy’s tray of papers, knocking them down. He bends down quickly and apologetically, to pick them up, and she bends over to help.

“Oh-- sorry.”

“Oh it’s OK--”

Then Sky sees the title written on one of her papers and stops, “The Secrets of Skyler Stone-- Wait-- What is this?”

Shy gasps nervously, trying to grab the paper from him, but he holds it away from her, curiously reading it with a furrowed brow.

“Oh, that-- It’s-- nothing. Just an experiment, give it back, please--”

“No wait-- Stone, did you know when you glow your truth shows, the secrets of Skyler Stone? Shy, are these the lyrics you finally wrote for that melody you sang when I first met-- err-- saw you? Is this-- your song?” He eyes her curiously.

She looks away sheepishly, “Well-- it’s about you. So-- I guess it’s sorta-- *YOUR* song-- heheh.”

Sky reads more to himself, then eyes her, and hands it to her, “Sing it for me.”

Shy humorously freaks out as her iPod playlist ends, “*What?* I-- *What?* No-- I-- I’m not even sure if it’s finished. I-- no, I just-- It’s stupid. I sound like a stupid lovesick boy band fangirl.”

Sky laughs warmly, teasing her, “My favorite kind.”

Shy looks away, embarrassed, “Sky--”

“Just a few lines. You don’t have to do the whole thing if ya don’t want.”

She teases him back, “Oh yeah but, I just have to do *a few lines* even if I *don’t want to, right?*”

Sky chuckles, playing with her, “No. But YOU wrote it. Don’t you like it?”

She sighs, “Yeah I like it, but-- that doesn’t mean it’s for-- public consumption.”

Skyler just gazes at her cheerfully, curiously, teasingly. Shyanne stares back. Then finally, she sucks her teeth and sighs, conceding, as she grabs the paper from him, and shakes her head. He grins.

“Yes!”

“Just a few lines.”

“Just a few lines.” He nods, and sits back against the wall, with his arms draped coolly around his dark jeans-clad knees, like she’s about to tell him a really exciting spooky story at a campfire out in the woods. Shy nervously gulps, clears her throat, and sings softly--

“Oh how you, glow when you move, through my spirit. You are electric. Peak into my shores. Speak and I’m all yours. Some thing in your soul-- Hums to be soon told. Cause The Lord-- Put in you-- The power to-- Speak-- life to art-- Shine light in dark. And-- every time-- Your eyes meet mine-- All-- I can see-- Is beautiful mystery. Soooooo:

“STONE (Mister Stone, Mister Stone); Did you KNOW? (Did you know, Did you know); When you GLOW (When you glow, when you glow); Your truth SHOWS (Your truth shows)-- The Secrets-- of Skyler STONE (Mister Stone, Mister Stone); Did you KNOW? (Did you know, Did you know); When you GLOW (When you glow, when you glow); Your truth SHOWS (Your truth shows); The Secrets-- of Skyler Stone. The Secrets of Skyler Stone.”

She gulps and looks up at him, “It’s-- something like that. I dunno. It’s-- not totally finished. And-- It’s ridiculous, I know--” She quickly folds her paper, putting it away, hiding it inside her eggshell pants pocket.

“You probably think I’m this crazy, obsessive girl now, just like you did when you thought I was The Valentine Killer. And now you probably think I’m the killer again, cause The Valentine Killer has an obsessive nature, like this, right? I knew I shouldn’t have gushed. You’re afraid of me again now, aren’t you? Just-- forget I did this and...”

He clasps his hand over hers, “No. I like it. I wanna hear it all.”

She’s stunned-- but pleasantly-- and smiles at him, relieved by his enamored appreciation, of her enamored appreciation of him, “Nah, it gets kinda loud, heheh-- I go up really high when I sing. And I don’t wanna wake these guys up.” She nods at Sky’s konked out friends.

He smirks, nodding, “OK yeah. They get the grumps when they don’t get their beauty sleep. But promise me you’ll show me all of it later? When things are-- better?”

Shy smiles and nods at him. Sky looks intently into her eyes, and kisses her once more-- A sentimental, tender kiss. Then he pulls back and looks at her.

“This was the *worst* day of my *entire* young adult life-- and *YOU*-- in just a few minutes-- managed to save it-- somehow. Thank you, Shy Valentine.”

Smiling Skyler kisses Shyanne's forehead. Elatedly surprised and proudly pleased-- Shy beams. Eavesdropping Lissette frowns-- FURIOUS--

--AND AGAIN ENRAGED IN FLAMES OF MADNESS.

--Perhaps Valentine Killer madness?

Sky jumps up, helping Shy up, and picks up her papers.

"I'munna grab a snack from the machine. Want anything?"

Lissette closes her eyes to "play sleeping" as Skyler moves toward her, talking attentively to Shyanne, while draping his blue flash drive around his neck. A dark shadow floats past Lissette's hallway window. But nobody sees it.

"Aw, thank you-- I'm starved!" Shyanne nods feverishly at Skyler, as she puts her earbuds back into her ears, and casually plays Pentatonix's *NSYNC Accappella Medley Tribute song on her iPod, as she grabs a pen and goes over her song again, reading the paper of her lyrics in her hand.

Skyler quietly steps out of Lissette's hospital room, and strolls over to the snack and drink machines down the hall. He sticks a green bill into each machine, and buys a few sandwiches and sodas, with his Cross-stickered sky blue flash drive neck chain visible from beneath his shirt.

But then he senses something.

So he turns slightly, to look down the hall, toward where he came from, and he sees a ghostly, dark shadow stalking Lissette's hallway window. He sneaks toward the figure. Puts his food and drink on a vacant counter, and stealthily sneaks up on the stalker.

But the shadow looks over at him-- sees him-- turns-- and runs. He immediately breaks into a run, sprinting around various medical equipment that's in the way, and he chases the figure down the vacant hall, as the figure knocks stuff over, to block him from catching up.

“HEY!”

Sky chases the figure into an emergency staircase, spiralling down the floors, until he leaps and catches them. But the figure fights back, just as artfully skilled as he is, both using clever martial arts moves to subdue the other.

“NINJA!” He gasps, half-realizing, in admiring awe, and half-accusing, in challenging fight.

Finally, he grabs the back of the ninja’s mask, to reveal their face, holding them in a vice grip, as their hair gets stuck in Sky’s flash drive chain. Skyler tries to remove their mask-- but they yank their hair away from his chain, and slip out of his grip, giving him the mask-- but still not allowing him to see their face. --And most of their hair is still covered by the black cotton head mask.

But Sky notices something on his flash drive chain as he holds the back of the mask that covered the ninja’s head-- a lightweight lock of flaming red hair. He pulls the hair out of his Cross stickered flash drive neck chain, holds it up, and admires it in the light. He sniffs it. It smells like...

“Raspberry sherbert shampoo?” He looks shocked at it, “Laura?? -- *Laura’s* The Valentine Killer???”

CHAPTER [42] MEET THE BULLYING EXTREMISM SUPPORT TEAM

IT'S SUNDAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-JUSTICE DAY #1)-- and Zack holds himself like a pissed off wife, glaring furiously at Sky and Shy, while glancing at the new, Cross-stickered USB chain, now hanging around Skyler's neck, back in Lissette's day-lit hospital room, as *NSYNC's song, "Bye Bye Bye" plays faintly through the pink earbuds around Shyanne's neck.

"NO-- NO-- NO! Laura? MY Laura? The Valentine Killer? NO. NOPE! Sky-- What've I ever done to you, that you'd turn-- the love of my life into a murderer? Hmm? I have been *nothing* --but faithful to you, as the proud bff, of my creative, tech-genius brother-from-another-Mother. Cousin-from-another-dozen. Kinfolk-from-some-other-menfolk. And-- you react to that by-- turning my *girlfriend*-- into a *serial killer*?"

Both Skyler and Shyanne eye Zack, in awe of his comical delusion, as they say in unison, "She's not your girlfriend."

Zack takes mellow dramatic offense, "You people-- just don't know what love is. Mmkay? Cause what Laura and I have-- is true love."

Shy takes humorously fake offense, rolling her neck, in an obvious attempt to mimic stereotypes, “What do you mean, “*you people*”?”

But the sweet, girly, pink-rimmed, “pretty nerd” glasses, on her laughing face-- sabotage it-- and the bubblegum pop playing on her iPod-- doesn’t help her act.

So Zack shakes his head, and rolls his neck back at her, with his finger up, much more convincingly-- like he really means it, “Oh no my sprightly spirit-sensing sistah. Ya can’t fake offense to *shut me up!* My *love* shall *not* be *silenced!*”

--Ahp. Wellp. Was worth a try.” She yawns, shrugs at Sky, twirls like a stretching ballerina, and sits back down.

Skyler nods, glancing back at her softly, “Yeah-- you don’t really look like the neck-rolling type, angel.”

“Is it the glasses?” She starts to take off her glasses until he tilts his head a bit at her.

“It might also be the teenybopper bubblegum pop hit bouncing buoyantly out of your earbuds.”

“Ah!” She nods, realizing, “Next time.”

She jokes, pointing to him, as if she’ll nail it, the next time anyone needs her to play-act out-of-character, and she resumes bopping her head merrily to her youthfully delightful sounds, doing the dance moves with her hand and neck, and singing the words of the song to herself with hilariously fierce passion.

Sky chuckles at her, then turns and looks at Zack sympathetically, “Zack--”

“No. My Laura’s a life GUARD! A SHERO! Not a life EXTERMINATOR! A MONSTER! We will NOT debate, how the Mother of my future children, is some compulsive homicidal maniac... and butcher of the innocents. Instead, we will PROVE her innocence TODAY. RIGHT NOW. THIS INSTANCE.”

“OK.”, Sky shrugs and nods.

“OK.”, Zack shrugs and nods.

“OK.”

“OK.”

“OK.”

“OK.”

“OK.”

“OK.”

“OK.”

They stare at each other a beat.

“Mmkay so how do we do that?” Zack stares at Sky, lost, expecting him to think something up, which he usually does.

“Wha-- What? Prove her innocence?” Sky rubs and shakes his head, tired, “I don’t-- nuh--”, Skyler realizes suddenly--

“P. Roof. BEST. We just have to find living members of the group BEST, to tell us what P. Roof looks like! I think the location of their Support Group Meeting might be in Theresa’s flash drive-- er-- Shyanne’s COPY of Theresa’s flash drive. And it’s probably not too far from here. Let’s check it out.”

Suddenly Steven, Nathan, and Hadji return into the room, carrying loads of snacks, drinks and food, as Zack reads a text message on his cell phone and frowns. Skyler notices.

“What? Another Valentine Kill?”

“Nah. College recruiter. She wants to meet my parents 1st, before they consider letting me in. But the ‘rents are always fighting. It’s gonna make me look bad.”

Shy looks surprised by this, as she bops her head to the next song on her playlist-- Jeff Savage’s Love of Silence Remix of Jars of Clay’s “Heaven”.

Nathan snorts at Zack's problem, as he helps Steven and Hadji pull out all the snacks, onto Lissette's meal table; never too disabled to crack a good joke, and contribute something to the group. --Besides just being the butt of Zack's jokes all the time.

"You could always just--", he takes a deep, labored breath, "Hire some strangers--", he takes a deep, labored breath, "To play your parents for a day--", he takes a deep, labored breath, "So they'll like you better-- haha." He takes a deep, labored breath.

Steven smirks, "Yeah. And then you can hire somebody ELSE to play *YOU*-- so they'll like you better *TOO*."

Steven, Hadji and Nathan laugh. Shy starts to giggle at the random jest, but then she looks at Zack, sees him shoot them all dirty looks, looking stung, and then she looks away, deciding not to join the group jokery at his expense.

It wasn't her style to knowingly hurt peoples' feelings-- when they were nice to her. --And ever since she'd been in that room with them-- Zack was the nicest one to her. Followed by game-addicted Hadji. Then-- eventually-- stressed-out, high-strung Steven, and frosty, silent Nathan.

--Lissette mostly just ignored her.

"Oh yeah, haha." Zack cuts his eyes at them, folding his arms, already upset over Laura-- and this wasn't helping.

Skyler chuckles, shaking his head, as he drapes his arm around Zack's neck, "Hey hey, lay off my childhood brotha-from-anotha-motha, cousin-from-another-dozen, kinfolk-from-some-other-menfolk, man. I'll have you know that the gaming girls in Australia LOVE his humorously myopic personality."

Zack beams proudly at Sky, grateful for his good-natured support, as Sky pats his shoulder, and Hadji, Steven and Shy laugh with them.

Nathan looks a bit stung by Sky's defense of Zack. Then Sky bops over to Lissette. She's still sleeping. He bends over, closer to her ear, and whispers.

"I know you can hear me. I know you saw us at the mall Friday night. I know you've been pretending to be asleep whenever I'm in the room. And I know you're hurting. And I'm sorry for your pain. And for being M.I.A. --But you're still my friend, I love you, even if it's not in the way you want me to. --And you're still beautiful. --Just -- Pray for me."

Skyler kisses her forehead, nods to Zack and Shy to follow him out, as the 3 wave goodbye, to Hadji, Nathan and Steven, who wave back to them, and they leave. Mildly puzzled Hadji, Nathan and Steven eye each other, shrug, then pull out cards to play. Steven glances at sleeping Lissette--

--who smiles.

ZOOM! VROOM! SWOOSH!

Zack speed-races his new-looking, hot red sports car down the busy sunlit state road, like a bat out of hell, as Skyler clings to his passenger seat, reading the GPS on his cell phone, through the dark lenses of his black and orange motorcycle sunglasses, and Shyanne rolls around in the backseat, smacking into both door windows, as she lolls from side-to-side, at every turn.

Zack's neon-green, Cross-shaped, cardboard, air freshener smacks his windshield, as it hangs from the rearview mirror, and The Family Force 5 Remix of Newsboys' "Mighty To Save" cool beat song, blasts loudly-- and with humorous irony-- through the speakers of the racing whip.

"Dude! Can you NOT get us *killed* or *stopped by cops*?", Skyler scrambles to grab the GPS, as it flies out of his hands, from the clumsy, jerky, swooshing speed of the lightning fast vehicle.

“Or nauseous--”, Shyanne’s body slides to the left door, “--and throwing up?”. She slides to the right door, “--Holy crap!” She slides to the left door, “--You drive”, she slides to the right door, “--*lightyears* worse”, she slides to the left door, “--than me!”. She slides to the right door,

“--This is”, she slides to the left door, “--actually dangerous!”. She slides to the right door, “--You’re gonna”, she slides to the left door, “--get us pulled over”, she slides to the right door, “--by cops, Zack!” She slides to the left door.

Zack literally bursts out laughing at her fear, with a knowing look, shaking his head wittingly, as he zooms around each nearby car that shares the road with him-- by only fractions of an inch between his automobile and theirs.

“PHFF! I don’t get stopped by cops. Cops stop Black guys in *rich* cars, and White guys in *poor* cars. They don’t stop *White* guys in *rich* cars, like-- *EVER*.”

“Yeah, how *did* you get a car this fancy? And why don’t you ever offer it up to the group, whenever we all need to get somewhere together?” Sky abruptly holds onto his seatbelt, to keep himself from sliding into Zack.

“What are ya talkin’ about, Sky? You and I drove in this car before-- when we went down to that tech convention, out in--” Zack looks down to the side, remembering what Sky did that day-- to one Officer Loehman-- in defense of that girl--

--and how another person is now here, in the car with them, to listen in on their conversation about it.

Zack eyes a queezily distracted Shyanne, as she flings about, in his rearview mirror, and quickly changes his tune.

“Um, actually, yeah, I forgot, that-- was another friend. Uh--” He rethinks it...

“My parents may never get along, but they make good money. So they gave this car to me as an apology for making me live in hell every day of my childhood. Annnd, I don’t offer it to the group because-- I’m completely self-centered.”

He shrugs honestly. Sky and Shy stare at him-- and then they also shrug, somehow refreshed by his blunt honesty.

“OK, that makes sense.” Sky nods.

“Well at least you’re honest about it.” Shy tilts her head thoughtfully, looking out the window that she’s been flung into the most recently.

Zack grins obliviously, “Thanks! --I think so. So where we goin’ Captain America?”

Skyler eyes his GPS, then the road, and then points, “Make a left up here. It’s not far.”

Zack blasts his way into a parking lot and speeds into a parking space, breaking abruptly.

He turns the car off, tosses the keys up, into the air, catches them back in his hands, with a giddy smirk, and shoves them in his blue jeans pocket, as he swiftly slides out of his car, and slams the door shut.

Sky staggers out of Zack’s car, with unintended hilarity, and falls onto the ground, as soon as his foot hits the pavement.

He crawls toward Shy’s door, lifting his sunglasses up onto his forehead, then he stops to cover his mouth, not sure if he’s about to barf or not.

He taps his fist to his chest and mouth, with a nauseous release of breath, and then, feeling stable enough, he leans onto the car, to help himself climb back up to his feet, and he opens Shyanne’s door.

But he can’t find her.

“Shy?”

He looks closer inside, and realizes that she's tumbled to the floor, wedged snugly behind the driver's seat, with her legs haphazardly sprawled up on the backseat.

"I'm stuck." She pouts deliriously at him, looking, dazed, confused, disoriented, and exhausted.

Her hair and clothes look completely disheveled.

"Oh-- hold on."

Tipsy Skyler hurries around to the other side of the car, jerkily falling back and onto the car, still dizzy himself, and he rushes to open the backseat door behind the driver's seat. He slips his arms around jammed Shyanne, and starts lifting her up out of her little car trap.

"Huh. --You'd think they'd dress this place up a bit if they really expect people to come here." Zack just obliviously stands with his hands on his waist, looking up at the drastic lack of human touch, on the dirty, gray, dilapidated building before them. He is completely-- and merrily-- unaware of the ridiculous fiasco going on with his friends, right behind him.

--A fiasco that his reckless driving habits created.

Finally, Sky wrenches Shyanne free from her snare, and--

THUD!

They both fall back together, onto the concrete ground outside of Zack's car, as Zack just shakes his head at the building's poor exterior, folding his arms in kiddish disdain at it. Skyler teeter-totters up, and grabs Shyanne's hand, helping her up. She lurches into him, and he catches her diagonally, hugging her carefully, until they both stabilize.

"Thanks. Guess my baby-bearing hips just weren't made for sporty little race cars." She jokes, stifling her puke-reflex with a nauseous little giggle.

"I love your baby-bearing hips." Skyler speaks softly to her in a quiet voice, now steadied, as he smiles down at her kindly, and he gives her a sweet little peck on the lips.

Shyanne smiles at him sincerely, then notices Skyler's chained drive facing inward, and she instinctively fixes it for him, turning it right side out for him. Skyler looks down, confused. Then realizes what she's doing, and looks at her with a touched smile of realization, as if remembering-- and missing-- what it feels like to be nurtured by a female. She smiles back at him as he gazes warmly at her.

Zack looks back at them, "Would you two lovebirds hurry up-- This place is giving me the creeps. And we haven't even gone inside yet."

Sky and Shy smile at each other. He grabs her hand and walks with her, over to Zack, and stands with Zack on his right and Shyanne on his left. Then he pats Zack's shoulder.

"Zack-- bro-- My girl is precious cargo. We are SERIOUSLY gonna have to work on your crazy driving habits."

"Why? What's wrong with them?"

Wide-eyed Shyanne's jaw drops in total disbelief of Zack's complete lack of behavioral self-awareness. Skyler just shakes his head at him, with an awed chuckle. Then he notices the plain, desolated building in front of them-- isolated, in this vacant abandoned store plaza that they're in-- and he suddenly catches a case of the creeps himself.

"Whoa. This place *IS* creepy."

Zack nods, "*Right?* For a place that calls itself 'BEST', they have the *WORST* location and exterior imaging."

"You mean non-existent." Shyanne frowns at the creepy building, suddenly not wanting to go in.

"Let's go." Sky eyes the place challengingly, and they walk into the dull, nameless, almost vacant building.

Zack's shoe sticks slightly to the pavement. He pulls at the sticker on his shoe as he walks, but looks awkward, as he nears the building.

Skyler chivalrously holds the door for Shyanne to pass through. Then Zack grabs the door from Skyler, who nods, and waits for Zack to go in ahead of him, after Shyanne.

But Zack's distracted by the sticker on the bottom of his shoe, and waves at Skyler to go on. Sky glances at Zack's shoe, then at Zack, both bewildered-- and increasingly weary-- of his compulsive fixation with it.

Then Sky notices how Shy is curiously wandering around the lobby inside, looking like she wants to explore it, and he quickly rushes into the building, to chase after her.

Inside the lobby, Skyler grabs Shyanne's hand, and humorously guides her back toward the desk reception area, by the waist, like a baby.

Zack catches up with them but continues fiddling with his shoe. Sky shoots a curious "WTF" look at Zack, who clumsily tries to pull the sticker off the bottom of his shoe, as they saunter up to a counter, with a tacky, temporary, red, white and gold banner draped poorly above it.

A dull-looking receptionist, with a hard, sweaty face, and simple eyes, greets them, wearing an inappropriate church dress, as if it's the only professional attire in her wardrobe. Shy notices the shiny crystal Cross ring on her finger, and the red, white and gold name tag sticking to her chest, that reads, "Hello I Am Marisol. I am The BEST Member of Bully Extremism Support Team!"

Zack notices Skyler's "STOP IT" stare, and immediately stops klutzily pulling at the bottom of his shoe.

"What? It's annoying." He shrugs at Sky, then turns to face the woman behind the counter, "Hi-- *Marisol?*" He reads her name tag, "Hi. We need to see the leader of a loser support group, called BEST." He grins cluelessly at her, thinking he's being polite.

“Kay?” Marisol looks a bit confused at him.

“Yeah so can you get him? --Or her?” He clarifies.

“Kay?” She’s still lost.

“K what?”

“Kay?”

“Yeah, k what?”

“Kay?”

“Oh my God-- Stop it.”

Skyler laughs at humorously upset Zack, shaking his head, and speaks to Marisol in the Spanish that he learned in school-- and from Lissette. Marisol fervently nods and points to a few offices in the back, to the side, down a hallway and alcove, as she shakes her head, grinning at him.

“Oh, oh, oh, Senior P. Roof, El leeder!”

Sky’s face suddenly drops, “P. Roof-- es-- el-- leeder?”

Marisol nods, smiling, “Si, si.”

Zack looks between Skyler and Marisol, with a tense, worried expression, recognizing the serious look on Sky’s face, as he glances at Skyler’s pocket-- the one that Sky is tapping again, because his Mother’s Cross isn’t there, “What is it? Whad she say?”

Skyler looks at Zack and Shyanne seriously, “P. Roof isn’t a member of Bully Support. P. Roof’s the leader of it.”

The 3 of them stare ominously at each other, realizing what this means. If P. Roof is the killer, and P. Roof is the leader of this group-- then P. Roof isn’t just a dangerous member of a legitimate operation.

--P. Roof is the orchestrator of a fake one. --One specifically designed to hunt and catch The Valentine Killer’s prey.

Suddenly, an energetic jogger in her late 20s or early 30s, with light brown hair, wearing short, black, running shorts, and a sleeveless, fitted, black workout top, trots in, and speaks in Spanish to Marisol, who smiles, nods, and writes down her words.

Marisol nods, "Mensaje para, Senior P. Roof--"

Sky looks at the jogger, realizing, "You know P. Roof?"

The jogger smiles, nodding, "Yeah! You know him too?"

"Ah ha!" Zack points goofily at her, "So it's a HIM! NOT a HER!

I *knew* my sweet Laura was innocent!"

"Sorry?" The jogger looks at Zack, confused.

Shy shrugs thoughtfully, "Well technically this doesn't mean the killer isn't a female. It just means that the group member that Core 4 *suspected* as the killer-- is a male. But if they were wrong-- the killer could still be Laura."

"*KILLER??*" The jogger looks at Shyanne, alarmed.

Zack huffs at Shyanne, "Hey, Sleeping Beauty-- stop hating on my soulmate. There's room for 2 pretty princesses in this castle."

Skyler smirks, shaking his head at Zack's deluded attachment, "Seriously dude-- you need medication." Then he eyes the jogger seriously, "No, ma'am, we, um, we were trying to schedule a Best Meeting with Mr. Roof. You know him personally?"

He gestures to her note on Marisol's desk. She glances at it, and gasps, realizing, as she shakes her head, with a little giggle.

"Oh no, we're not really up close and personal with each other. Not yet, heh. We just jog together a lot on the weekends. And sometimes late at night on week days. Or early mornings."

Shy throws her an unnerving look of caution, "Stay away from him. He's a rapist."

"*RAPIST???*" The jogger looks back at Shyanne, stunned.

But now Zack's confused again, "No he's not. He's a murderer."

"*MURDERER???*" The jogger looks at Zack, shocked.

Shy rolls her eyes at Zack, “Yeah, but she clearly wants to have sex with him. So she’s not going to stay away from him unless you tell her he’s a rapist. If you just say murderer, she’s gonna wanna see him in person, so they can laugh about it. And then go have sex. And then-- he may murder her. But if you say, ‘Oh he’s a rapist’, the most she’ll ever do is answer the phone when he calls. Not go see him in person, just to become his next victim.”

“*VICTIM?????*” The jogger eyes Shyanne, freaked out.

Sky decides to add more fear to the pot, “Please excuse my colleagues here. Though Roof *is* dangerous, we mainly want to be sure, that no more innocent people, get unknowingly caught up, in the fatal crossfire, of his deadly, secret, underground, gang-turf warfare, and semi-automatic gun-smuggling ring.” He nods casually, as if this is boring, old news.

“*GANGS AND GUNS?????*” The dazed jogger stares back at Skyler, terrified.

Skyler nods, “By the way, he’s always changing his identity, because he’s a con artist. Which image did you see him in last?”

The horrified jogger rattles her mind, trying to think back, hard, “Um... He-- dresses in all black... Um... champion swimmer-- fast talker... Um-- I think-- he may be rich-- based on the way he acts and says things.”

“Whadaya mean?” Shy furrows her brow at her.

“Well I mean, like, I told him how I wanted to go scuba-diving, but I was afraid of drowning, and he instantly went into this long thing, bragging about how *he*-- could afford to buy all these high-tech, no-bubble, oxygen tanks that camouflage, to blend in with his fancy yacht. Like that was supposed to impress me, or make me less afraid of choking to death--”.

She thinks about it for a beat, “Well it did.” She nods, “I wanna see his yacht.”

Skyler tries to snap her back and keep her focused, “What race was he?”

She thinks about it, and realizes, “Ya know-- I’m not actually sure. He’s shy. Always wears sunglasses and a hat. Never seen him without it. Actually-- he looks like he could be anything, now that I think about it. I mean-- since I’ve never actually fully seen him. Yet. Well, I mean, he’s not like-- super dark or something. Obviously. But I guess he’s like a lot of people-- somewhere in between, maybe? --Or it could just be a fresh tan. That’s really all I know about--”

“Ay Dios meo!”

All of the sudden, Marisol gasps, holding her hand to her chest, in horror, as she looks at her outdated, big, off-white-boxed computer screen.

Everybody looks at her quizzically. To quickly avoid any further language barriers, Marisol just shakes her head at her screen and points at it, waving for them all to move in closer to see it.

Skyler and Zack dart around her beat-up, gray desk to see it, followed by Shyanne and the BEST Jogger Girl, as they all swarm around Marisol, and look at the video that she has pulled up from the web.

On it, is a newly released video--

--that shows Officer Slager and his fellow local cops--

--drowning The Core 4-- in The Secret Ridge Christian High School swimming pool.

CHAPTER

[43]

MEET THE FUNNY THING ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

The video shows over a dozen uniformed cops, swarming into the swimming pool room of Secret Ridge Christian High, and gang rushing The Core 4, screaming at them, with their guns drawn on them, making the kids scream and drop to the ground with their hands up, shaking uncontrollably, in tremendous fear.

“GET DOWN ON THE GROUND!” Slager yelled ferociously at the youths, “DOWN ON THE GROUND! NOW-- NOW-- NOW-- NOW-- NOW!”

The cops violently shoved their knees into each screaming teen’s neck and head, choking them and making them bleed.

Slager sneered at one of the 2 boys, “Thought you were one of us, Nelson. Turns out, you dumb little make-believe detectives thought you could make a fool of us. Spying and recording us. But we got friends in high places who’ll make all your evidence on us go away.”

“You’re rapists! And murderers!” Nelson rashly-- and unwisely-- shouted back at Slager, unleashing a mountain of apparently repressed anger and seething disgust at him, “You harass and abuse and rob people-- you torture and humiliate people!”

--And you frame people for your crimes, and throw decent people away into prisons, and break up their families for generations! Just cause they don't look like you! Or cause they're too poor or too sick to fight back!

"I'd rather *die* than be one of *you*! You soulless, racist *pieces of skunk shit*! You're not God! And God's gonna show you all the *real* meaning of torture, when you meet your devil master *face to face* in *hell*!"

"Stop it Nelson, he'll kill you!" Mary cried under her breath to him, sobbing, with a wet, red face.

THUMP!

Nelson cringed, as Slager kicked him hard in the side of his trunk, "I *AM* God, boy. *Whites* are God. *Wealth* is God. *We* are God. And *you* don't talk to your *God* that way."

Nelson winced and squirmed, still shouting back at Slager, with genuine righteous hatred in his voice, "You can't get away with killing 4 teens at a Christian High School, and nobody figure out what happened. Especially not us. We're investigators. Everyone's gonna immediately know whoever killed us, did it to stop us from exposing their dirt.

"Which is just gonna put a hot magnifying glass on everything we've ever done-- and on everyone we've ever met-- which'll lead right back to all of you, and get you all put away for life. You know how inmates feel about cops. I hope they bend you all over and make you their wifey, for a few horrible months, before they unceremoniously shank you all to death in the shower."

"What are you *DOING* man--", Abraham stared in floored and freaked horror at Nelson, as the cops jammed their knees further into their heads and necks.

“Tryin’ to take the heat off you and Theresa--”, Nelson whispered back to him so only Abe could hear, “So they’ll focus all their racist venom on me. Otherwise, they’ll torture you, before they--”

Abraham’s eyes widened in stunned awe at his best friend’s brave self-sacrifice and perceptive awareness, as Slager cut him off-- by punching him in the back-- HARD-- making Nelson cry out.

“We got away with some Valentine murders. Drowning anyone we want. Pretending their lives had meaning. All the worthless Black, Brown, homeless, crazy, and crippled lives, nobody who matters will miss. All the fun we have on rape days, goin’ round huntin’ down all the lil animal women and kids, of all those broke an dirty races.

“And showin’ em who their God really is. We been gettin’ away with it for *hundreds* of years, boy. What makes you think we won’t get away with it for a *hundred* more?”

“Cause we have all our info saved on a remote grid--”, Abraham cut Nelson off before he could agitate these monsters too far, “--scheduled to flood the media with everything we ever recorded. Should anything happen to us that prevents us from checking in every night. So if we die, all our info goes public. Before you can even look for it.”

“Abraham-- please.” Theresa whispered to him.

What did her whisper mean?

“Oh yeah?” Slager snickered at them, “And which grid is this? The made up one in non-existent ville? Our allies have cameras and wires on you every day 24/7. We’ve watched you for weeks. Never once saw you, “check a grid” or, “set an alarm”. So nice try, kid-- but you’re all gonna die tonight-- and we’ll make sure it looks like a suicide pact.”

The girls immediately bursted into gut-wrenching sobs, trembling in weepy fear. The guys gulped, thinking hard about what to do next, as they shook angrily, and helplessly, under the skull-crushing pressure, of all the heavy, muscular, police knees, that dug their backs, napes, and faces into the hard, red, white, and gold-painted concrete ground.

Then Theresa made a valiant attempt to save her friends, as the immoral men in uniform, unlawfully bore down upon them, “There’s a secret file that I have personally hidden, where no one can find it, except for the person who I told. When they find it-- what’s on there-- will bring you all down. Hard. And fast.

“Unless you let my friends go. I’m the leader. You can drown me like a Valentine Killer victim. But let them go home. They don’t know how to do anything. I’m the mastermind. Without me, none of this is possible. Without me, Core 4 is-- dead in the water. So let them go. And I’ll tell you where my secret data file is.”

Abe, Mary, and Nelson all gasped for her to stop. Then Slager bent down, into her ear.

“Well little African Princess--” He flicked the royal gold, decorative, tiara-shaped hair-bow, that held a few braids back, behind her head, with the flick of his index finger, “I don’t believe you. In fact-- I believe-- Miss Thompson-- that you’re just really good at trying to make a fool out of us all. --But --speaking of you all being-- ‘dead in the water’--”

He quickly tied weights to Theresa’s ankles, grabbed quivering Theresa by her long, dark braids, as she and Mary screamed, and the guys yelled and wriggled to break free of the cops’ overbearing force, and he threw Theresa into the swimming pool, with the weights attached to her ankles.

“That’s exactly what we had in mind.” He sneered at her blurry image as it fell further down, into the wavering water --and watched Theresa sink to the bottom of the 30 foot pool.

Then he turned and glared at the other 3 screaming youths, and pointed to their heavy weights, with the rope tied to them.

“SHUT UP!” He snapped at them-- and they all went quiet, into silently shaking sobs, “OK. Now here’s what’s gonna happen. You little shitheads are all gonna tie these weights to your sneaky, snooping, little ankles... --jump into this here pool... --the same way you’ve seen us do to all our sacrifices, in ritual, over at headquarters--

“--and you’re gonna hope you drown, before we get tired of waiting, and just shoot your faces off. Now I’m sure your parents would rather see your dead faces in tact. So be good little sons and daughters, and for once in your foolhardy lives-- just do as your told. Otherwise, we might just have to kill your parents too-- just for shits and giggles.”

He nodded at his subservient officers to get off of them. The officers released their knees and weight from the 3 teens’ heads, necks, and backs, and kick-pushed them toward the weights on the ground. The 3 youths tied the weights to their ankles, stood up, and picked up their weights, standing over the pool.

Abraham started praying, “Dear Heavenly Father, please bless our souls as we depart...”

Slager yelled at him, “WE’RE THE ONLY GODS IN THIS UNIVERSE, AFRO NERD!”

He kicked Abraham in the back, shoving him into the pool. Then he eyed screaming Mary and shaking Nelson, folded his arms, and just shrugged at them with an arrogant snort.

“Well? --*JUMP!*”

Mary screamed and jumped into the pool. Nelson quickly followed. The cops snickered with a dark nod of vicious, wicked, demonic solidarity, as they paced around the pool, with their hands on their belts, waiting for the kids to drown.

Skyler fast forwards the video on Marisol’s screen.

Slager eyed another cop with folded arms, "How long has it been?"

The cop checked his watch, "Bout 10 minutes. Do we check 'em?"

Slager shook his head, "No. You'll contaminate the scene and then forensics will know it wasn't a suicide. Ten minutes is enough to drown anybody under 30 feet of water. Just-- wipe all their hard drives clean, grab all their crap, and plant the letters. I'munna go get a coffee."

"K boss."

As ordered, the cops all cleaned up their tracks, and took their stuff, as one typed up a suicide letter on The Core 4's four laptops, with plastic-gloved hands.

Sky fast forwards the video to the end, to show the cops leaving the scene, all exiting out the door. A few seconds later, a high-pitched screech occurs as the video ends, and narration begins over the words on the screen that read: "#Be-The-Hero-You-Been-Waiting-For".

Skyler is stunned when he suddenly hears his own voice speaking over the video, "A smart cookie once told me that-- villains will always be villains. But the rest of us don't have to be cowards who just stand by and watch.

"The best way to test the strength of your soul is to ask yourself: If society was made up of nothing but people who were just like me, would someone like Hitler fail or succeed? I'd like to think we'd kick the super villain off the cliff. Not follow him right off it.

"So please Laura. I'm counting on you. You're our last final hope for survival and for truth. So please-- RELEASE THE VIDEO. Cause monsters never reign forever. Eventually they all go down. Team Good always wins the final battle. David beat Goliath to the ground.

"Now *WE* are the superheroes. This world belongs to US at the core. So get in the game. Fight back. Be the hero you been waiting for. Cause we were saved. And now it's our job to save others. What would Jesus do?"

And the video ends.

Skyler, Shyanne, Zack, Marisol, and the Jogger Girl, all stare at the screen, in jaw-dropped shock and awe.

Zack gulps, “Well. --Your Dad’s just been cleared.” He chuckles awkwardly, as he clears his throat, profoundly sobered by what he just saw.

“Yeah.” Skyler eyes the freeze frame of their school swimming pool, “--And so has Laura.”

CHAPTER

[44]

MEET JUSTICE

BAM BAM BAM!

“WE KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE, SLAGER! OPEN UP!”

A loud, powerful man’s voice shouts from behind the big white front door of Officer Slager’s upper class, 2-story house, topped off with a white picket fence around his yard.

Slager sits, watching cartoons with his blonde 6-year-old little daughter, as Mikey Slager Junior plays violent, pornographic video games at the computer, and Mrs. Slager makes lunch in the kitchen. Everybody jumps and looks up at the door, startled.

Stunned, disbelieving Slager, gets up and struts over to the door, completely certain that he’s untouchable-- and in control of whatever it is, that’s at his doorstep.

His face sours slightly when he realizes that he’s faced with a giant SWAT Team of cops, all over his lawn, holding big, black assault rifles at him. “What-- is all this?”

His eyes can’t believe what they’re seeing, as Mikey Slager Junior pauses his rape of the women under his virtual arrest, and stops stealing big bags of money from the people that his virtual cop car pulls over, in his video game, at the computer.

He goes over to the window, and see all the many SWAT Team police who have redecorated their front yard.

“Michael Slager Senior, you’re under arrest, for the murder of Nelson Hart, Mary Meeks, Abraham Davis-- and Theresa Thompson.” The lead SWAT Team cop begins to read him his rights-- but Slager doesn’t listen.

“*What?*” Slager looks genuinely shocked.

“What is it honey?” Mrs. Slager starts to peek her head out of the kitchen, and she slowly eases up behind him in increasingly confused shock, as she sees all the cops at their door, raining fully deserved terror, harshness, and humiliation, down on her husband.

“Nothing, just stay back there--” Slager snaps at her, and she falls back, slightly cowering in stunned uncertainty. He looks back at the cops, as they read him his rights, “You’re making a mistake. This is completely ridiculous--”

But the lead SWAT teamster finishes reading him his rights, despite his arrogant protest, “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you, in the court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford one, one will be appointed to you--”,

--And as soon as he finishes telling dumbfounded Slager his rights, he yanks off his SWAT mask, to reveal his rich, buttery, beautiful dark skin, and says to him, “And as the Father of a brilliant Afro-nerd, and a beautiful African princess-- I look forward to seeing that you get the justice you really deserve.”

Slager’s eyes widen, as he meets the cocky-angry glare, of the very Black cop, who’s reading him his rights.

“No-- Wait-- Wait--” Slager starts.

“He’s resisting arrest, fellas-- *Take him down.*” The leader of the pack smiles knowingly at Slager-- who suddenly looks terrified.

The cops yank Slager the way he yanked Theresa, turn him around, and throw him to the ground-- HARD-- digging their knees into his head, neck, and back-- the exact same way his boys did to The Core 4.

Slager chokes, bleeds, and bruises, under the heavy pressure and crushing weight of the SWAT Team, that shoves his face into the floor, making it almost impossible for him to even breathe-- let alone talk. They roughly jerk and manhandle his arms behind his back, and slap handcuffs on his wrists-- so TIGHT that he cringes in pain.

Slager's pained eyes fall on his scared wife, as she stands by, holding their confused and frightened kids back, and they all watch the madness unfurl. It registers in his mind that the police are completely emasculating, criminalizing, humiliating, and weakening him, in front of his entire family--

--the way he'd wrongfully done to so many others--

--the way he'd wrongfully done to Skyler at school.

He looks down and away, processing this, and he begs the police, "Don't let my daughter see this. She's only 6."

But his kids upstage his request, as they start to cry and scream at the cops. His daughter sobs in upset confusion, as his son yells in furious anger.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING???" Mikey Slager Junior shouts, "HE CAN'T BREATHE! YOU'RE HURTING HIM! HE CAN'T BREATHE! STOP IT! HE CAN'T BREATHE!"

Junior lurches forward, out of his Mother's arms, and charges the police, grabbing the red, white and blue figurine of a police officer, from off the small, decorative, dark, wooden, hallway table-- and he throws it at the SWAT Team leader.

"No--" Slager realizes, trying to stop him, "Mikey-- Stop--"

"GET OFF HIM! GET OFF HIM! GET OFF MY DAD, YOU NIGGER!"

"MIKEY! NO!" The Slagers both scream at him loudly.

But, whether raised to think he's above-the-law-- or just scared for his father's life-- or both-- Mikey punches and wrestles with the SWAT Team any way, until--

BANG!

The Slagers gasp. Mikey looks down, and sees blood pouring down from his chest. He staggers back, confused by it. Then--

BOOM!

Junior collapses to the ground, in a pool of his own blood, and Officer Slager and his wife both SCREAM in gut-wrenching sobs.

"NO!" Slager cries, "He wasn't doing anything! He was unarmed! He was just upset!"

"He was *big*." The trigger-happy cop who holds the smoking gun just shrugs casually, completely emotionally detached.

"Alright, let's go." The Lead Cop pulls crying Officer Slager up off the floor, "Somebody call a medic for the man down."

"He's not a man--" Slager chokes out, as he watches his wife weep over his son's bloody, motionless body, "He's just a teenager. A minor. A kid."

"A BIG teenager, who was CHARGING at us." The trigger-happy cop who shot him reminds everyone, with a chill, matter-of-fact nod, as shocked Slager cries helplessly at his lifeless son.

"Alright," The frustrated lead cop waves one of the cops in to check Junior's pulse, "See if Slager's '*TEENAGE MINOR KID*' is still breathing."

But he's not breathing.

And after all the murders of undeserving people, that he's committed under the name of the law-- Michael Slager Senior knew it.

Mikey Slager Junior was unarmed.

Mikey Slager Junior was guilty of no major crime.

Mikey Slager Junior was shot by a cop who was afraid of him.

--Or just didn't like him.

And now--

Mikey Slager Junior is dead.

--Drowning in a dark, red pool of his own blood.

--Hugged by his crushed and devastated Mother.

--As his nefarious "boys will be boys mischief" plays out, in his criminal video game, over at the family computer--

--with Junior's virtual police avatar swaying in place, waiting for him to come back and guide it, to act out all of the bad behavior, that his Daddy never taught him was wrong.

--Abuse of power finally comes full circle.

A suddenly traumatized Officer Slager looks away from his son's video game, and back at his bleeding son, as one of the other cops squeezes out of the foyer, full of SWAT teamsters, and goes over to check his pulse.

"My son." Slager says quietly to himself, as he watches the cop check his son for a pulse, "My namesake."

Pulse Cop looks up at Lead Cop and shakes his head "no". The lead cop sighs at this, as Mrs. Slager screams in torture, and Officer Slager shakes his head in disbelief.

"No-- Check again. CHECK HIS PULSE AGAIN! CHECK IT AGAIN!"

"Alright, come on Slager." The Lead Cop yanks shouting Slager back, as Slager gets weak in the knees, and falls into their arms, falling apart, in a sea of tears.

Suddenly--

--Slager can feel.

The pack of SWAT police drag him back up, on his feet, and shove him out of his house, as he weeps in severely wounded shock.

Slager's confused 6-year-old daughter watches her Daddy get taken away by the police, as her Mother sobs over her big brother's dead body, and suddenly--

--she feels something leave her-- a profound loss-- of something that she won't be able to explain, until many years later--

--a wholeness.

--a happiness.

--an innocence.

--a peace.

--a faith in humanity.

Suddenly, all of that is replaced by something else--

--a darkness.

--a distrust.

--an emptiness.

--a barricade.

--a fear.

And eventually--

--an *anger*.

Outside, the entire neighborhood comes out to see Slager's massive and fatal-- fall from grace, as various people start to trickle out of their homes, looking to see what's going on, and they watch the long line of loud SWAT hummers, trail alongside the sleepy, residential street.

Inwardly annihilated Slager looks around, and sees all of his neighbors watching him, in his arrested state, as the SWAT Team takes him toward a cop car. Unable to face the humiliation and consequences for his evil acts, he looks down, sees one of the guns in another cop's holster, and grabs it from the back of his handcuffed hands, swinging it around, trying to aim it at different cops--

--hoping to get them to shoot and kill him now.

Everybody screams and shouts, as neighbors duck and run away. Trigger-happy Cop pulls his gun out on Slager, and shouts, "PUT HIM DOWN! PUT HIM DOWN!", like Slager's a rabid dog. But Lead Cop kicks the gun out of Slager's hand and body slams him back to the ground, yelling at Trigger-happy Cop.

“NO! HE’S TRYING TO COMMIT SUICIDE-BY-COP, BECAUSE HE’S A COWARD. HE FACES PUBLIC TRIAL AND THE DEATH PENALTY, AND GOES TO PRISON IN GEN-POP-- WHERE THEY’LL GIVE HIM HIS JUST DESERTS, AND MAKE AN EXAMPLE OF HIM. LET HIM SUFFER THROUGH THAT HUMILIATION AND TORTURE, BEFORE HE DIES. THAT’S HIS PUNISHMENT. DON’T YOU TAKE THAT AWAY FROM HIM. OR THE PUBLIC. HE DOESN’T DESERVE THAT KIND OF MERCY.”

Trigger-happy Cop lowers his gun, realizing this, as Slager cries helplessly, like a little baby, into his finely manicured grass.

Lead Cop jerks sobbing Slager back up, opens the police car back door, shoves him in, slams the door shut, and talks into his radio, “We got Slager. How we doin’ on the others?”

“We’re roundin’ ‘em all up.” A female officer’s voice speaks back to him through his radio--

--as Slager’s little girl watches it all from the front doorway of their home.

Meanwhile, as stated, all of Slager’s cronies get rounded up by SWAT. Some get ambushed and caught in the middle of eating, showering, sleeping, screwing, doing drugs, watching TV, or playing a baseball game, at little league, with their sons. Others run out of fire escapes, and get chased down alley ways, until they get cornered and caught, and drop to their knees, with their hands held behind their backs, as the glaring bright police car lights blind them in the darkness.

--No one from The Core 4 video gets away.

Meanwhile, back at the police station, Skyler’s Dad, Detective Stone, sees a reporter stating the news on a TV screen, in the ceiling corner, through the jail cell bars--

“In a shocking turn of events in The Valentine Killer case, a video was released online today, showing local cops, led by Officer Michael Slager, murdering the 4 teens from a local Christian High School, who were framed as a suicide.

“After finding out that Officer Slager was the one who led the crime scene lab technicians to the evidence against Detective Stone, on another Valentine case, The FBI-- led by Agent Maria Diaz-- discovered, after further questioning, that Slager planted the evidence against Stone, in order to get him to take the fall for his and his coconspirators' crimes. Next up on W-A-G News--”

Detective Stone looks down from the corner ceiling TV, and sees Agent Diaz and Officer Bob, escorting Skyler over to his solitary holding cell, as Lecrae's moving song “Lucky Ones” featuring Rudy Currence plays through his earbuds, from the iPod in his pocket. Officer Bob unlocks the cell, and Skyler quickly hugs his Dad, with a tearfully relieved smile.

“DAD!”

“SON--”

Detective Stone smiles, hugging Sky back, then looks up at Agent Diaz, and discretely mouths a dignified and knowing, “Thank you.” She beams tearfully, just glad that he's free again. Officer Bob pats Detective Stone's arm, with a relieved and smiling nod, also glad that he's free again.

When the 4 of them exit the area and emerge into the police station lobby, everyone applauds them, and some even salute. Stunned, Detective Stone just nods, looks over at his office, and sees that it's been decorated with a big “Thank You” banner, and gifts.

--And apologies.

Officer Bob gets a call on his radio to come outside and leaves. Detective Stone, Sky, and Agent Diaz mingle briefly with the friendly officers for a bit, and then they leave.

Outside, the TV news media go crazy, swarming distraught Officer Slager and his other handcuffed bad cops, as Officer Bob and other cops, grab them from the police cars, and take them in to jail, at the police station, with their lawyers.

Newly released Detective walks out simultaneously. Stone and Slager pass each other, as happy, tough, peace-faced Stone, walks down the steps of judgment, and angry, crying, red-faced Slager, walks up the steps of judgment, handcuffed, and carried in, by Officer Bob and other clean cops.

Slager glares at Skyler.

Skyler smiles back at him, proudly, “Looks like David did beat Goliath to the ground. Guess those sentiments weren’t so expired after all, huh Slager?”

Slager lunges at Sky-- angry and vicious-- but Detective Stone steps in front of Sky and blocks Slager’s view of him. Slager stops, directly across from Stone, as Bob and other cops, get blocked by the media frenzy, that swarms them.

Slager’s humiliated eyes meet Stone’s justified eyes. As said, Stone shakes his head at him with a disgusted smirk of disappointed contempt-- and smiles knowingly-- in righteous anger at the justice he gets for his epic fall from grace.

Confused Slager’s eyes widen, as he remembers what Stone said, back at SRC High, in the swimming pool room. But before he can back up, run off, or duck-- Stone **HEADBUTTS THE CRAP OUT OF SLAGER**, knocking him back, into arms of legit police.

Then Stone **PUNCHES Slager HARD**, with a sharp undercut to his chin, that **POPS Slager’s lying jaw out of place**. Slager falls to the ground, and grabs his bloody, throbbing face, as Stone watches him whimper in pain, in front of everybody, who flash photographs, and video record, Slager holding his bloody face, in humiliating agony. Like the school bully...

--who got shocked when someone finally came from nowhere --
and knocked him out on his ass.

Stone just stands there, looking at his fellow officers, who look back at him, then back at Slager, then back at him, then-- they all salute Stone, with an amusing nod-- in total righteous solidarity with him.

Stone nods at them, and walks away, down the steps, with his son and Agent Diaz, a free man again-- trading places with Slager, as cops yank bloody, whimpering Slager up by the armpits, and shove him past the media, pushing Slager and his evil cronies up toward the building.

Then-- a photographer notices Officer Bob making a disgusted face, as he nudges a fellow cop, and points to Slager's backside, when Slager walks funny, in front of them.

The other cop looks closer and gags, realizing that Slager literally *DID* crap his pants when Stone head-butted him. The photographer looks, sees the burnt umber mess slowly blotching the back of Slager's pale pants, gasps in delighted shock, and immediately flashes the *PERFECT* photo of it--

--A photo that ends up on the cover of a famous, nationally syndicated newspaper, the next day, under the headline, "JUSTICE BEAT THE CRAP OUT OF CRIMINALLY CHARGED SLAGER AND HIS FELLOW DIRTY COPS".

Various TV show hosts go crazy in cable news debates, discussing the rampant lack of any accountability in the law enforcement institution, that allowed this madness to happen.

TV show hosts go crazy in interviews on cable news with Detective Stone, about the racism, trigger-happy prejudice, and unfair treatment, from his own, and what he thinks about The Core 4 Video that was released, heralding him as a heroic martyr, and talk of book deals.

TV media news people also go crazy interviewing Sky, and heralding him as the hero and face of the new, #Be-The-Hero-You-Been-Waiting-For” cyber campaign, and talk of book deals. Sky answers their many questions, as he points to the chained, Cross-stickered flash drive around his neck.

One reporter says to him on her show, “We hear that you and your girlfriend also saved 21 orphans, when you helped them escape the abusive cult behind these deranged martyr killings. Tell us about that.”

Newspapers show the police department issuing a public apology to Detective Sirius Stone and his son, Skyler.

Various mailed letters of sympathy and gratitude pour into the home of Sky and Detective Stone, from all over the nation and worldwide. Some with checks-- including hefty book deal advances. Sky and his Dad look at each other, holding the letters and checks up-- both equally awed by it all.

Police bring Sky’s dog Einstein, and his equipment and data back home. But of course, as suspected, Theresa’s drive has completely vanished-- mysteriously gone, like it never existed. The evidence bag that it SHOULD be in-- is empty.

Skyler hands a new copy of Shyanne’s copy of Theresa’s flash drive to his Dad, along with the old, rusted steak knife, with the strange inscription on it, that he and Shy found in the creepy, underground tunnel of skulls. His Dad takes them, eyes them, then Sky, and nods to him knowingly, patting him on the shoulder, now on the same page with him.

Wearing his signature black and neon-orange sunglasses atop his head, Sky is high-fived at school and fist-bumped by most of the cop kids, who apologize to him and pat him on the back, nodding, shocked. Though some look angry, because some of the men in the video were their Fathers-- like most of Junior's friends.

Mikey Slager Junior's locker is vacant, with a few flowers and teddy bears, left there from a few girls, who were in his social circle.

Wow, Sky thinks to himself, It's sad what happened to Slager's son, but the fact that even the school bully can warrant flowers and toys for his passing, is unbelievable. He watches Cherokee Chase pass by Junior's locker, stare at it, and then just keep rolling his wheelchair on, down the hall.

When Sky is late for Mr. Skitz's history class, instead of penalizing him, he riles the class to applaud, pointing to the chalkboard, where he's written "#Be-The-Hero-You-Been-Waiting-For". Sky blushes, moved by this, and his laughing friends who clap.

Sky plays his saxophone for Shy as she sings along-- reading her theme song for Sky's campaign, "Be The Hero You've Been Waiting For", written by Shyanne Valentine.

Sky does martial arts and spiritual meditation with his spiritual martial arts trainer, Mentor Yogi-- who does in deed exist-- and is in deed real. Tough, tall, handsomely strong Yogi's pretty Asian wife enters with some hot tea on a tray and kisses him-- sweetly, during their training session.

Sky visits Lissette in the hospital with flowers, and she and the group hang out and play games.

Finally Lissette's well enough to leave, with her arms around Steven and Skyler, who walk her out, as Zack continues to try to absentmindedly and humorously peel off the sticker on the bottom of his shoe.

Skyler logs on to ReverbNation.com/ChristiLuv and orders "front row seats to TP and Christi Luv's concert"-- which he and squealing Shyanne go to-- and screaming fans jump up and down all around them, as they laugh at the madness together.

Sky hands Shy "Midnight Premiere tickets to the next Angel Wars movie". He waits in a long line with her, to see her favorite superhero flick. Inside, they wear 3-D glasses and jump, excited in mesmerized awe, at all the supernatural action and outer space adventure.

Shyanne gives Skyler a new key chain-- a shiny, new, hard, smooth, red-and-white-framed, golden, cross-shaped key chain, with a photo of the 2 of them in it, in which she hugs and kisses him, as he grins playfully into the camera, taking the selfie of them together.

Inscribed on the back of it, is the quote, "I can do all things through Christ, Who strengthens me". --Skyler-- You are a strong and noble warrior son of The Most High King! Never lose hope, faith, or love, my love. The *future* needs you now... --Love, Shy Valentine".

He smiles at it, looks a bit melancholy at his motorcycle key chain, still missing his Mother's Cross, and then he slips his new Cross key chain onto his ring of keys, looks at it for a moment, and genuinely smiles at it.

Wearing her metallic, pink-rimmed glasses, Shy writes at her desk in her bedroom, then sees a text on her metallic pink cell phone, from Sky, that reads, "Hey-- Come outside. I have a little gift for you too."

Curious Shy smiles delightedly, goes outside, followed by her curious Mother, and gasps in total shock, as they see handsome Skyler, who stands nonchalantly, leaned back against a big, metallic pink S-U-V, proudly grinning at her, behind his black and neon-orange sunglasses, as he holds up the keys and the paperwork, that unsuspends her from driving.

Her Mother puts both hands to her mouth with an awed gasp, as Skyler opens the backseat, to show them both the cool, dark pink interior of the brand new car. Shyanne runs over to Skyler, ignoring it, and hugs him tight, knocking him back into the seat, and making him laugh gleefully, as she smooches him all over his face.

Detective Stone goes back to the job, as usual. Everybody welcomes him back with cheering applause again, welcoming him back to work. Behind closed doors, Agent Diaz hugs and kisses him, romantically.

Skyler, Shyanne, Zack, Lissette, Steven, Nathan and Hadji all play games in the billiards room. Dad checks on them, smiles, notices Zack's shoes behind the door, AGAIN, and shakes his head, laughingly.

Then, eventually, everybody but Skyler goes swimming over at Nathan's house.

And finally--

--Everything goes back to normal...

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ACT IV: PART 2 - P. ROOF

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CHAPTER

[45]

MEET THE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

IT'S A NEW DAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-TRUTH MINUTE 60)-- as Skyler taps loudly-- typing fast-- on his lit-up, neon-blue, glowing computer keyboard, behind his black and neon orange sunglasses, chewing on peppermint bubblegum, and listening to The Robbie Bronnimann Remix of Thousand Foot Krutch's dubstep dance song "Fly On The Wall", on his headphones, in his bedroom, while happy Einstein chews a dog toy, up on his bed.

Dad walks by his open doorway, noticing distracted Sky, and walks back, stopping, to see what he's doing. He sees the big, bright full moon shining bright in the dark night sky, as it beams through the window, and he steps in, over to Sky, who's in all black-- from shirt to jeans to his hiking boots.

He smiles in wistful melancholy, at their old, family photos, in the Cross-shaped picture frame that sits on Skyler's desk. Then he smells the deliciously steamy aroma of cheese, tomato, and pepperoni, looks to the side, and sees that Skyler hasn't even touched the greasy, rippled, white paper plate, full of tasty pizza slices, that sits over at the edge of his workstation.

Surprised by this, he knocks on Sky's desk, beside the photos, startling Skyler-- who jumps, awakened-- and removes his funky, electronic, dubstep-bass-beat-thumping headphones, looking up at him.

"Oh, hey Dad."

Sky smiles, looking visibly tired, as he rubs his eyes, to adjust to the visuals of tangible reality again.

"Hey son, whatcha-- doin'?" He nods at his desk work.

Sky looks at his computer screen, and the various notes scribbled on the papers, that are chaotically scattered all over his desk, and he realizes, "Oh-- Just goin' over the last part of The Core 4 Death Video. Analyzing the sound at the very end, just to clarify it. Why? Whatsup?"

Dad shrugs, "Well-- usually, you're with Shy. Or your friends. Ya know, Core 4's case's over son. You still on it?"

"Yeah, well everybody's partying at Nathan's and I said I'd be over soon to join 'em. But, I just-- there's just something bothering me."

"What's that?"

"Laura."

"Who's Laura?"

"The girl Zack always talks about."

"Oh Lifeguard Laura? The one who recorded The Core 4 Death Video?"

"Yeah."

"What happened to her?"

"I dunno. Soon as The Core 4 died, her whole family disappeared. Now that the killers are behind bars, you'd think they'd feel safe enough to come back out. But they haven't. Laura's still M-I-A."

"Think The Psycho Factory got to em?"

"That's just it. If anybody got to them, how could Laura hit Lissette with a shovel at Nathan's, and ninja fight me at the hospital? Bad guys don't just-- let you off your leash to go out and attack your classmates-- and then lock you back up in your dungeon."

“Plus-- Then she released the video. So she’s clearly alive.”

“What? Think she had something to do with the murders?”

Sky thinks, seeking a Eureka, “I think it’s weird that Laura tried to mess with Lissette *twice* with no explanation.

“I think it’s weird how one set of Valentine Killer victims looks like the killer respected their identities-- revered their significance-- felt bad for killing them-- and gave them Valentine cards with a moral message on them. But another set of victims just looks like a series of poor copycat jobs by killers who had NO respect for their victims’ identities. NO reverence for their significance. DIDN’T feel bad for killing them. And DIDN’T give them Valentine cards.

“I also think it’s weird how easy it was for the cops to get The Core 4 to drown themselves without putting up much of a fight. Who submits to their own demise that fast? And where’s the part of the video where they paint The Valentine Killer’s lipstick heart kiss on their hands? And if The Core 4 were martyrs-- then which monsters loved them?

“And then where’s the part of the video where Theresa looks wet before she gets thrown back in the water, like she said in her audio recording, to Abraham, “Don’t you throw me back in”? I just think there’s more to the story... that wasn’t revealed on this video. I think this video’s been cut off. And whatever was cut off from this tape-- is the reason why Laura is still missing.”

Detective Stone nods curiously, in agreement with his son-- then informs him, “Well-- Theresa was the only one with a kiss print on her hand. And you know Theresa didn’t drown right? She was the only one, found without any water in her lungs. She died by blunt force trauma to the head.”

“She did?” Sky is suddenly even more confused.

“Yeah.” Dad nods casually, “Her murder weapon’s still missing. And when did she say, ‘Don’t you throw me back in’?”

Skyler hands him a new flash drive, "In the audio that I decoded with the analyzer I built here. Showed me what The Core 4 were all saying in that file I gave you at school the day after-- after it happened."

Dad furrows his brow at him curiously, "You got somethin' outta that?"

"Yeah. It's all on my new drive. All our latest Core 4 notes too. But I thought you already had your "professionally paid team" look at the audio, and decode it?" He raises his eyebrow at his Dad, sincerely curious.

Detective Stone shakes his head, "They couldn't do it. The tech wasn't good enough."

"Well well." He smiles with a knowingly cocksure grin at his Dad, "Does this mean-- dare I say-- that you shall finally admit it?"

Dad sighs humorously, with a knowing glance up into the air, "Admit what, Skyler?"

"That instead of assuming I'm a deviant, or a serial killer, you should maybe assume I'm something else? Like maybe-- a *genius*?"

Stone laughs, shaking his head, "OK-- *MAYBE* you're a genius, Skyler. *MAYBE*."

Sky pumps a happy score, "Yes! *Maybe* my Dad knows who I am now! *MAYBE*! And all it took was years of inventing brilliant works of technological art, that he never took seriously-- and then audio analyzing the snuff film of 4 good kids who died 1 sad night."

"Day." Dad corrects him.

"What?" Sky looks up at him, as the song on his iTunes changes to The Andy Hunter Remix of Thousand Foot Krutch's dubstep dance song "Down".

"Day. They died in the day. Turns out. The autopsy revealed that their times of deaths actually happened shortly after school ended that day. In the afternoon. Not night."

“But-- that’s impossible.” Sky racks his brain to try to understand this, “Theresa called me later. In the evening.”

“Well, according to the autopsy, she was already dead when you received that phone call. So apparently, the Psycho Factory must have decided that faking their suicides wasn’t enough. They had to get the detective’s son to believe The Valentine Killer did it, by trick dialing your phone, after secretly recording a Core 4 conversation.”

“But-- that-- makes no sense--” Sky murmurs to himself, both royally confused-- and deeply disturbed now.

“None of this makes any sense, Skyler. The existence of that Psycho Factory makes no sense.”

“But-- why would they-- why give me a lead-- that could bring them all down in the end?” He focuses intently on the thought, trying to crack it like a combination lock.

“I dunno, Sky. But I got a date.” Dad throws him a pleasant shrug.

“And how’d they know about my audio analyzer program?” Sky’s totally flummoxed.

“Don’t stay up too late stressing over this Sky. Ya don’t get paid to stress on this kinda stuff. That’s my job. You go have fun with your friends. Be young. While you still can. It’s gone before ya know it.”

“It just doesn’t-- make any sense.” He labors over the details, seriously puzzled.

Detective Stone pats Sky’s shoulder, “There’s sliced ham in the fridge. I’ll check in with you later.”

“K.”

Sky stares at his screen, contemplating, as his Dad shakes his head, smiling-- proud of him-- and leaves.

Sky leans back in his chair, “Something’s wrong.” He realizes with more certainty now, “Something’s-- very, very-- very wrong.”

Detective Stone escorts Agent Diaz into the ritzy restaurant, both dressed nicely-- him in a dashing black tux, and her in a long, fitted, slinky, womanly, blood-red dress, with an open back. The host guides them over to their fancy-dressed, candle-lit table, and leaves them with their menus, as they smile warmly at each other.

Later, they eat lobster, and she chats on with him, as her gold Cross necklace shimmers around her elegant neckline.

“So that was the last time I ever did THAT, hahaha.”

Stone nods at her, distracted in thought. She knowingly puts her hand on his, startling him out of his contemplation.

“What is it? --Which case?”

“Core 4. My son-- He-- pointed out the same issues in the case that have been bugging me too. Got me thinkin’-- about Callahan.”

She furrows her brow curiously, “The homeless man?”

“Yeah he saw someone in a hooded robe an candle ritual.”

“So? He also sees ‘higher beings’.” She rolls her eyes.

“Yeah. So does my son’s new prophet girlfriend, during her “mystical seizures” or whatever.” He sighs in thoughtful reflection, “I know being homeless has driven Callahan off the deep end. I remember seeing his local TV commercials for his vintage car sales business. He became a different person after his wife and kids died in that car crash. But sane or not... --if Callahan really did see that hooded robe ritual, then-- where were all the robes and rituals at the pool?”

“They were framing it as a suicide, not a Valentine.”

“Then why did they leave a kiss print on Theresa’s hand-- and why were they all still wearing the rings?”

“What rings?”

“In the video. All the cops wore those gold GOD rings. So there *is* a cult that needs to be dismantled. And they are part of it. Yet they didn’t do the ritual. They had-- no ceremony. No formality. No art, or style, or-- even basic interest in experiencing the death of their victims.

“It was business. Matter of fact. They jus wanted to get rid of ‘em. Like a loose end. Got off on ends, not means. The victims weren’t martyrs. They were just in the way.”

“What-- what are you saying?” She looks serious now.

Stone thinks for a moment. Then he pulls out his iPad, plugs Sky’s latest flash drive into it, scans the files, sees Brook’s notes, stops, reads it, and he realizes.

“They didn’t just *visit* Jaleel’s fiance Brook. They *grilled* her.” He eyes Diaz, “And she sang like a canary.”

“Whad she say?” She’s curious.

His face grows grim as his eyes widen at the info he’s reading on his screen, “We got work to do. This is only the beginning. This--” He realizes something that stuns him.

“--What?”

“The rings.” He looks at her, “Have data chips in em.”

They stare at each other like they just struck oil. Then they both hurry up, and he puts his coat over her--

--as they quickly leave.

CHAPTER

[46]

MEET THE VALENTINE KILLER'S 1ST MISTAKE

IT'S A NEW DAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-TRUTH MINUTE 50)-- as dripping wet Zack hops out of Nathan's fancy pool, smelling like fresh chlorine, and Derek Minor's epic rap anthem "Party People", featuring Social Club, blasts loudly from the backyard speakers. He grabs his thick, blue, bath towel from a nearby pool chair, swipes his face with it, and drapes it over his shoulder, as he jogs across the hard, gritty, beige cement, until he reaches the cold glass back door, that leads into the house. But it's locked.

"Hey Nathan! I gotta take a leak! Stop locking us out of your house, you creepy control freak!" Zack teeter-totTERS quickly, from side to side, anxiously grabbing his stomach, as he tries to hold his bladder.

Steven smirks at Zack, as he throws the ball to Hadji, in the pool, "Yeah, cause I'm sure insulting him will get you to the bathroom SO *much* faster."

Hadji scoffs goofily at Zack, as the ball splashes in front of him, in the pool, "Why don't you just pee in the bushes like a real man!"

Zack snorts at him, "Yeah I'm sure you know all about toughin' it in the wild like a real man, Hadji. When was the last time you saw the sun? *First grade?*"

“I actually have to use the little girl’s room too. And I’m *definitely* not going in the bushes.”

Shy slips on her pink flip flops, jumps up, wearing her one piece, hot pink swimsuit, with a pink-purple sarong wrapped around her waist, and a big, pink beach towel draped over her shoulders, and she joins Zack by the glass back door, holding her silvery-pink-rimmed glasses in her hand, with her Cross-pearl charm bracelet jingling on her wrist.

Lisette stares at her ominously, with her Cross earrings dangling, and glances at Steven and Hadji, who play ball, distracted. She rises, and discretely follows after Shy, as Nathan electrically wheels himself over to the door, and starts to unlock it for them.

Zack pushes the door open to let Shyanne in 1st, before himself, a rare moment of social maturity and selfless growth for him-- as he wipes his dripping face with his towel again, and a disgruntled Nathan looks down at Zack’s wet feet.

“I don’t want you--”, he takes a deep, labored breath, “drenching my house.” He takes a deep, labored breath, “Where are your shoes?” He takes a deep, labored breath.

Zack thinks, and smacks his forehead, realizing, “Crap.”

Sky’s phone rings, as he plugs away at his computer, in his bedroom, and picks it up.

“Sup?”

“Hey--”

Zack’s jolly voice bounces spiritedly on the other end of the phone, as he does the bladder dance, over by the pool, in between casually looking back at Nathan’s glass back door, “Whatcha doin?”

“Tryna further manually isolate the audio data, on The Core 4 Death video, before refiltering it, through the automatic isolation process, of my audio analyzer’s anatomization sequence.”

“Oh-- Cool.” Zack nods to himself, either knowing exactly what Sky just said-- or just trying to give polite pleasantries, before diving into the real purpose for his call-- or both, “Hey-- Did I leave my shoes there?”

“Probably.” Sky smirks, with his eyes still fixated on his computer screen, as he types, scrolls, and clicks his mouse, to manipulate the colorful visual audio frequency layers, isolated by his program, “Why?”

“Nathan doesn’t want me traipsing my wet feet all over his perfect floor.” Zack scoffs incredulously, “I don’t get it. Why would you get a new pool if you don’t want to get your house wet and you can’t swim and your wheelchair screams bloody murder any time there’s any moisture in the air?”

Skyler sighs knowingly, “I’m not dropping what I’m doing to come bring you your shoes, Zack. What are we? *Five?*”

“No, I know. I can come get em. You’re only like, what, 5 or 10 minutes away?”

“Yeah DRIVING time, not WALKING time. And I’m sure he’ll let you in the house just to use the bathroom.”

“Well actually I kinda pissed him off by calling him a creepy control freak.” Zack chuckles, reflecting back on it.

“And why would you call him that?” Sky types away at his computer, focused.

“Because he doesn’t let us go inside his house without monitoring our every move, dude. It’s creepy. I don’t know why he cares. It’s not like his parents are ever home.”

“Maybe he jus doesn’t want you to break anything. Or *everything*.”

“Whatever. Pretty sure Shyanne’s not all break-tastic, and he’s watching her like a hawk as we speak.”

“Whadayou mean?” Sky suddenly furrows his brow at this.

“I mean, he’s following Shy to the bathroom and waiting for her to finish, to walk her back out.”

Sky raises an eyebrow, a bit weirded out by it, “That *is* creepy. Where’s everybody else?”

“The pool.” Zack catches the ball from Hadji and Steven, “We’re still playin’ waterball and--” He looks over at the lounge chairs where the girls were sitting, then he realizes, “Hey-- Where’s Lissette?”

“Lissette’s missing-- *again?*” Sky looks up incredulously at this, shaking his head in disbelief.

Can’t anybody keep track of this girl?

“I dunno.” Zack looks back as the song blasting out of the backyard speakers changes to Andy Hunter’s Remix of Thousand Foot Krutch’s “War of Change” dubstep dance track.

He sees that his blue towel fell on the patio, over by Nathan’s glass back door, keeping it cracked open a bit. So he jumps up, and walks over to it, but leaves it there, on the ground, to keep the door open.

“Oh-- I guess she had to use the restroom too, and she must have gone in, when my towel fell off, and it kept the door cracked open for her.” He realizes, “I-- What the-- Wait, hold on.”

Zack frames his eyes with his hands, as he looks through Nathan’s glass back door, “Oh boy-- I think I just saw Lissette sneaking around Nathan’s house and I coulda sworn I saw her pick up a butcher knife.”

Sky stops typing, “Stop playin’ man, that’s not funny.”

“Dude, I am NOT kidding. I’m goin’ inside the house. You got my shoes?”

“Ugh-- alright fine. I’ll go look. Hold on.” Sky mutes his music, casually pushes a button on his keyboard, and sees a blue and white box pop up on the screen, reading, “Automatic Audio Isolation Now In Progress”. Then he gets up from his computer and leaves his room, as Einstein follows him, wagging his tail.

Zack enters Nathan's livingroom quietly, and leaves the door cracked open, by his towel, behind him. Steven and Hadji look up and notice that everyone's gone but them. Then they look back at each other, shrug, and just go back to playing water-ball in the pool.

Inside Nathan's house, Zack goes over to the kitchen knife set, where a butcher knife is in deed missing. He grabs a smaller knife, and slowly moves toward the stairs. Then he hears a muffled scream and--

THUMP THUMP!

--Somebody tumbles to the ground. He quickly hides, with his back against the upstairs hallway wall. Then he continues moving toward the sounds upstairs.

Unsure where the sounds are coming from, Zack silently opens a door, and sees a dusty, yet sterile-looking, guest bedroom. He represses a sneeze, at the tiny particles of waste, that lay all over the floor and surfaces everywhere, covers his nose and mouth, shuts the door, and keeps searching the hallway.

Finally, he hears struggling by an open door, sneaks a peek inside, sees a hazy conflict over by an open closet, quietly creeps into the room, sneaks over to the 2 indistinct figures, who are struggling with each other, in the moonlight that beams down at them, through the big bedroom window-- and he sees Lissette choking a shadowy figure in a ninja outfit.

"Saw this bitch tryna sneak in the house after Shy and Nathan. This the same chick who knocked me out with a shovel and tried to finish me off at the hospital! But you aint know who you was messin' wit, did ya ho?"

Zack crouches down over the shadowy figure and pulls off her ninja mask-- to reveal-- his flaming-redheaded beloved--

--*Laura.*

Zack gasps-- *THUNDERSTRUCK*.

“Laura? You-- My-- My sweet Laura--

“--really *IS*--

“--*The Valentine Killer?*”

Skyler enters the billiards room at his house, sees Zack’s shoes, goes over to grab them, then stops abruptly, hearing Zack’s words.

“What? Did you just say Laura’s The Valentine Killer?”

Sky picks up Zack’s sandals, drops one absentmindedly, and turns to leave, without noticing it, as Zack’s startling news distracts him.

Einstein picks up Zack’s fallen shoe, and nudges Skyler with it. Sky looks down, realizing, grabs the shoe from Einstein, and is staggered in aghast disbelief, when he sees the sticker that’s been stuck to the bottom of Zack’s shoe all this time.

Back at Nathan’s house, Laura can’t talk, because Lissette keeps choking her, as Zack almost cries, staring at her, in devastated confusion.

“Laura’s the killer, Sky. We caught her sneaking into Nathan’s house. My sweet Laura-- The Valentine Killer.”

Laura shakes her head no, but can’t talk, due to the choking.

Back in Skyler’s billiards room, Sky sees on the bottom of Zack’s shoe-- a red, white and gold name tag reading, “Hi. I Am P. Roof. I am the BEST Member of Bully Extremism Support Team”.

“Zack.” Sky gulps, not sure if he really wants to hear the answer to this, “--Are *YOU* The Valentine Killer?”

Back at Nathan’s house, Zack furrows his brow, in confused surprise, at this strangely unexpected accusation.

“Nooooo. Why? --Are *YOU* The Valentine Killer?”

He figures, if they're all just gonna go around randomly accusing each other of being The Valentine Killer now, he may as well throw one back at Skyler.

"Nooooo." Skyler stares trepidatiously, at the sticker, on the shoe, in his hand, "So if *YOU'RE* not the killer-- why ya got the killer's Name Tag stuck to the bottom of your shoe, Zack?"

Zack thinks, confused, and then jolts back in grinning realization, "OH! *THAT'S* what's been stuck to my shoe all this time! Been meaning to look at it. --Huh. Dat's interesting."

Zack huffs cheerfully, with a curious nod, as Laura begs him for help with her eyes, while hyped up Lissette keeps her choked in a funny headlock.

"Interesting?" Skyler's jaw drops, "*Zack*-- Interesting is when you step on a 5 dollar bill. Or see a video of a cat kissing a dog. Having a serial killer's name tag stuck to your shoe, is not interesting-- It's *upsetting*. Now where did you get it? Was it when we visited the BEST building? Did you step on this name tag in the parking lot?"

"Oh nah nah." Zack shakes his head, "When Laura smacked Lissette with a shovel. I stepped in some trash."

Skyler works hard to keep his composure, "Zack-- Focus-- Who's trash was it?"

Zack thinks, and flashes back. He imagines the trash in both yards.

"It waaas-- The neighbor's? --No. It was Nathan's trash. No-- I definitely remember, cause I kept slippin' 'n fallin--

--To the point where I was like, 'Dude! I did *not* come to this pool to leave with a broken back or a cracked skull, just cause Lissette's coppin' a tude, just cause you're into another girl'.

"So I started thinkin' I got 99 problems, and then I started singin' in my head, like, 'If you havin' problems wit ya girl I feel bad for you son, I got 99 problems-- but a bitch aint one-- hit me!' And then I started thinking, like, what if B sang that to Jigga? Like, would he be offended?

"And then I was like, so is that sexism? Or is that feminism? Cause I know my Mom is always shouting about that to my Dad sometimes, in between, simply hating his very existence--"

"OH MY GOD-- ZACK-- STOP TALKING-- ARE YOU SURE THE TRASH WAS NATHAN'S???" Skyler races out of the billiards room in anxiety-ridden disbelief and panic.

Zack nods to himself, thinking, "Yeah yeah. Pretty sure. So the cops have been stalking Nathan? Now they're trying to frame *HIM* as The Val--?"

Zack looks to the side, and notices something under the bed that they're crouched next to.

--He pulls a gold bar out from under the bed.

Skyler runs back into his bedroom, sees his Mac read, "Audio Isolation 98% Complete".

Zack admires the heavy, shiny, pretty gold bar, in his hand, "Whoa. Dude. No wonder his parents are gone so much that their room is untouched and full of dust. They're probably out sailing the world on their, like, 99 yachts. Nathan can take care of himself. He's rich, dude. I just found a gold bar under his bed. Looks like-- pure gold."

Skyler freezes-- recalling Brook's talk to him and Shyanne, back at her house.

"They give gold bars to their kids every year as birthday gifts."
Brook told them, *"Pure gold."* Brook also told them, *"They are the masters of playing the victim when really they're the villain."*

--THEN--

Sky remembers Nathan's sarcastic remark to Zack, about his wheelchair, as he played pool with Lissette in the billiards room, *"Sorry my being the victim..."*, he took a deep, labored breath, *"of selfish reckless drunk drivers--"*, he took a deep, labored breath, *"is such a burden on you Zack..."* He took a deep, labored breath.

--THEN--

Skyler recalls Brook telling them, *"They're good at making you think that YOU'RE the guilty party--"*.

--THEN--

Sky remembers everybody looking at him funny in the billiards room, right after he met Shyanne.

"She's use to people dying." Skyler had said.

"Yeah but-- that's not the same as-- like, WITNESSING a traumatic event." Steven had said.

"A traumatic event like what?" Skyler had said.

"Like the one--", Nathan took a deep, labored breath, *"that you witnessed--"*, he took a deep, labored breath, *"as a child--"*

--THEN--

Skyler recalls Brook telling them, *"They teach them hacking, identity theft, electronic funds transfer--"*.

--THEN--

Sky remembers telling Shyanne, in the billiards room, *"Heheh, you have no idea. All my friends and I are master hackers. We can manipulate anything online. Alter documents. Even pretend to be other people. So no one can find us."*

--THEN--

Skyler recalls Brook telling them, *"They teach them how to play with audio data, trick dial phones, block, intercept and redirect calls, text messages, emails--"*.

--THEN--

Sky remembers talking to Shy in his bedroom.

"If anyone you knew was The Valentine Killer, who would it be?" Shyanne had asked him.

"Well obviously none of my friends, cause they were all with me at the exact time of The Core 4's deaths." He had said to her.

--THEN--

Skyler remembers his Dad telling him, in his bedroom tonight, *"Well, according to the autopsy, she was already dead when you received that phone call. So apparently, the Psycho Factory must have decided that faking their suicides wasn't enough. They had to get the detective's son to believe The Valentine Killer did it, by trick dialing your phone, after secretly recording a Core 4 conversation."*

--THEN--

Sky recalls Brook telling them, *"They train them to be athletically excellent too. Like in running and swimming"*.

--THEN--

Skyler remembers Nathan inviting them all over to his house, after the fight with Mikey Slager Junior, in the principal's office lobby, *"Wanna jump in..."*, Nathan took a deep, labored breath, *"--our new swimming pool?"*

--THEN--

Sky remembers the Jogger talk to them in the BEST office building lobby, *"We just jog together a lot"*, she had said.

--THEN--

Skyler remembers Zack's earlier words on their phone call to him from Nathan's house...

"I don't get it. Why would you get a new pool if you don't want to get your house wet and you can't swim--" He had said.

--THEN--

Sky remembers Brook telling them, *"They train them to always be listening to other people's conversations--"*.

--THEN--

Sky recalls Zack eyeing Nathan's bluetooth at the hospital, *"Blah. I'm bored."* Zack had said, *"There's nothing on TV. Nathan, gimme your bluetooth. I wanna call China. They owe us some money, right?"*

Steven and Nathan both shot Zack a dirty look.

Zack shrugged, "What? You wear it to look cool but it's not like we ever see you use it."

--THEN--

Sky recalls Brook telling them, *"And they train them to be leaders, not followers"*.

--THEN--

Skyler remembers telling Zack and Shyanne in The BEST Building Lobby, *"P. Roof isn't a member of Bully Support."* Skyler had said, *"P. Roof's the leader of it."*

--THEN--

Sky recalls Brook telling them, *"Though there have been some kids who successfully ran away and were never found."*

--THEN--

Skyler remembers Zack talking to him on the phone earlier, saying, *"I don't know why he cares. It's not like his parents are ever home."*

--THEN--

Sky remembers his Dad talking to him in the hallway, at home, the night he first kissed Shyanne. *"And Nathan--", his Dad had said, shaking his head, "Poor kid's lame in a wheelchair and his parents are never home. Absentee parents of the latch-key kid generation. Only met em once."*

--THEN--

Skyler remembers Nathan advising Zack about college recruiters at the hospital, *"Nah. Just a college recruiter."* Zack had said, *"She wants to meet my parents 1st before they consider letting me in. But the 'rents are always fighting. That's gonna make me look bad."*

"You could always just--" Nathan took a deep, labored breath, *"hire some strangers..."*, he took a deep, labored breath, *"to play your parents for a day--"* He took a deep, labored breath.

--THEN--

Sky remembers Shy talking to him in his bedroom, asking him, *"Who had motive to kill The Core 4?"*

--THEN--

Skyler remembers being at Brook's house, with Shyanne, and saying to the girls, *"So The Valentine Killer isn't an outsider-- or from the Whites Are God or We Are God cults. The Valentine Killer is an insider-- from the Wealth Is God cult. A close insider. Someone so close to the top, that they knew about your group before your group was even officially brought into the fold."*

--THEN--

Sky remembers the jogger in the BEST office lobby saying, *"Um... He-- dresses in all black... Um... Champion swimmer, fast talker. Um-- I think he may be rich-- based on the way he acts and says things."*

--THEN--

Skyler remembers saying to his Dad, in his room, earlier, *"I think it's weird that Laura tried to mess with Lissette twice with no explanation."*

--THEN--

Sky recalls listening to the phone call audio with his friends in the billiards room.

"Yeah but who's gonna believe us?" Abraham had asked.

"Laura." Theresa had said.

"Who? Lifeguard Laura?" Nelson had asked, "Why?"

"Before I came in here I saw her Dad install secret cameras everywhere." Theresa had said.

--THEN--

Skyler remembers more of his conversation with his Dad, in his bedroom, *"I think it's weird--", he had said to his Father, "how one set of Valentine Killer victims looks like the killer respected their identities. Revered their significance. Felt bad for killing them. And gave them Valentine cards with a moral message on them.*

"But another set of victims just looks like a series of poor copycat jobs, by killers who had no respect for their victims' identities. No reverence for their significance. Didn't feel bad for killing them. And didn't give them Valentine cards."

--THEN--

Skyler remembers Slager and his flunky cop ganging up on him in the interrogation room, *"Oh-- you-- You think WE are The Valentine Killer?" Slager had laughed, "Heh! That's rich. We're dangerous, kid. DEADLY dangerous. But we are NOT-- The Valentine Killer."*

"But you know who is." Sky had said, "You may not know you know. But you know. Maybe one of the kids your little John Wayne Gacy Psycho Factory took from Saint Valentine Orphanage, grew up to be a real hum dinger. Maybe she's lookin' for some payback for all the hell you put her through."

"Or him." Slager had said.

--THEN--

Skyler remembers telling his Father, *"I also think it's weird how easy it was for the cops to get The Core 4 to drown themselves without putting up a fight. Who submits to their own demise that fast?"*

--THEN--

Sky recalls The Core 4 Death Video, as Slager asked a cop, *"How long has it been?"*

"Bout 10 minutes." Another cop said, "Do we check 'em?"

Slager shook his head, "No. You'll contaminate the scene and then forensics will know it wasn't a suicide. Ten minutes is enough to drown anybody under 30 feet of water."

--THEN--

Sky remembers the jogger in the BEST lobby say to him, "He instantly went into this long thing, bragging about how he could afford to buy all these high-tech, no-bubble, oxygen tanks, that camouflage, to blend in with his fancy yacht--".

--THEN--

Sky remembers annoyed Nathan ignoring Zack, who nodded, at the hospital, "OK. What about your oxygen tank?" Zack had said to Nathan, "You can go a few minutes without extra air, right? I wanna see how long it takes me to hit nirvana."

--THEN--

Skyler remembers him and his friends listening to the Core 4 phone call audio in the billiards room.

"I can't believe it worked. I was seriously terrified." Mary had said.

"No-- Abraham-- Don't you throw me back in-- Abraham-- Hey-- No--" Theresa had said.

"Come on! Come to Daddy! Haha! Let's see if we can survive a 2nd time!" Abraham had said.

"Least you know you can breathe now!" Nelson had said.

--THEN--

Skyler remembers saying to his Dad in his bedroom, "And where's the part of the video where they paint The Valentine Killer's lipstick heart kiss on their hands? And if The Core 4 were martyrs --then which monsters loved them?"

--THEN--

Skyler remembers Brook telling him and Shyanne, *"Abraham was talking about asking Theresa to marry him at graduation, on the phone. I heard him say something about being afraid 'P. Roof' was in love with her.*

"And wouldn't take it well, finding out about them, cause Roof was obsessed with Theresa and clung to her soon as she defended him from cyber bullies. Roof fell in love with her ever since. Became very possessive over her."

--THEN--

Sky remembers telling Shyanne, in her bathroom, *"That's how Theresa 1st noticed me. When she saw me jump in and fight to defend Nathan from some bullies who were tryna rob him. That's how he and I met 2 years back. He latched onto me like I was his best friend ever since."*

--THEN--

Skyler remembers hanging out with Lissette, on his bed.

"Remember that 4th of July party?" She had asked him, "We almost kissed." She had said, "Then Nathan had to go to the hospital." She said, "But, what woulda happened if-- Nathan didn't get sick, and-- we kissed?"

--THEN--

Sky remembers Nathan shooting Shyanne a venomous look when Skyler went over to Lissette's bed, the first day Skyler saw Lissette at the hospital.

--THEN--

Skyler remembers Shyanne reporting back to him at the hospital, *"Even Steven came around. Begrudgingly. He didn't like it when I made him laugh, at first. So he tried to give me the cold shoulder. Even got Nathan playing along."*

--THEN--

Sky remembers talking to Dad in his room, *"I just think there's more to the story that wasn't revealed on this video. I think this video's been cut off. And whatever was cut off from this tape is the reason why Laura is still missing."*

--THEN--

Skyler sees his computer program speak to him in its loud, robotic, automated voice, back in his bedroom, "Audio Isolation Analysis Complete", it announces to him.

--THEN--

Sky remembers being trapped in the interrogation room by Slager and his goon, *"Funny thing about technology." Slager had said...*

"As valuable a resource as it is-- it can almost always be manipulated by anyone-- to reflect whatever either party wants. Electronic data can always be made to appear a certain way, to make a person see what they want them to see."

--THEN--

Skyler plays back the completed audio isolation on his Mac, in his bedroom now, and he hears the very clear and distinct, uniquely squeaky, high-pitched sound-- of a very familiar-sounding wheelchair-- entering the Secret Ridge Christian High School swimming pool room-- right at the end of The Core 4 Death Video.

--THEN--

Sky remembers Zack ribbing Nathan about his wheelchair, in the billiards room, "Nathan-- Dude-- Seriously-- When are you gonna get a new wheelchair? Every time it rains, that thing squeaks like nails on a chalkboard. And it like-- *JUST* started raining!"

--THEN--

Skyler plays the uniquely squeaky, high-pitched sound of Nathan's wheelchair entering the swimming pool room, at the end of The Core 4 Death Video again.

--THEN--

Sky remembers Nathan telling Zack, in the billiards room, *“But much like me...”* Nathan took a deep, labored breath, *“My chair’s allergic to water...”* He took a deep, labored breath.

--THEN--

Skyler plays the uniquely squeaky, high-pitched sound of Nathan’s wheelchair entering the swimming pool room, at the end of The Core 4 Death Video again.

--THEN--

Sky remembers Zack telling him over the phone, from Nathan’s house, *“Nathan doesn’t want me traipsing my wet feet all over his perfect floor. I don’t get it. Why would you get a new swimming pool if you don’t want to get your house wet, you can’t swim, and your wheelchair screams bloody murder any time there’s any moisture in the air?”*

--THEN--

Skyler plays the uniquely squeaky, high-pitched sound of Nathan’s wheelchair entering the swimming pool room, at the end of The Core 4 Death Video again.

--THEN--

Sky remembers the jogger in the BEST lobby, saying to them, *“Oh no-- We just jog together a lot.”*

--THEN--

Skyler plays the uniquely squeaky, high-pitched sound of Nathan’s wheelchair entering the swimming pool room, at the end of The Core 4 Death Video again.

--THEN--

Sky remembers talking to Theresa at school, *“Hey-- Are-- are you OK, Theresa? Maybe-- you should just tell me now.”*

“I-- No-- NO! I’m being watched...” Theresa had said.

“By who?” Skyler had asked her, *“Who’s watching you?”*

Now Skyler recalls from the subconscious side of his eye, seeing Theresa glance hesitantly at Nathan, who watched her intensely, in the Secret Ridge Christian High School halls, from a distance, when Steven was talking to him.

--THEN--

Sky plays the uniquely squeaky, high-pitched sound of Nathan's wheelchair entering the swimming pool room, at the end of The Core 4 Death Video again.

--THEN--

Skyler remembers seeing a heart kiss on Theresa's hand at the Secret Ridge Christian High swimming pool crime scene.

--THEN--

Sky recalls his Dad saying to him in his bedroom, "*Well. Theresa was the only one with a heart kiss on her hand.*"

--THEN--

Skyler plays the uniquely squeaky, high-pitched sound of Nathan's wheelchair entering the swimming pool room, at the end of The Core 4 Death Video again.

--THEN--

Sky remembers Brook telling him and Shyanne, back at her house, "*Also referred to himself as-- a monster.*"

--THEN--

Skyler plays the uniquely squeaky, high-pitched sound of Nathan's wheelchair entering the swimming pool room, at the end of The Core 4 Death Video again.

--THEN--

Sky remembers reading The Valentine Killer's Trademark Valentine Card on the laptop at Shyanne's house, when he first met Shy, "*This martyr was loved by a **monster**.*" He read the words out loud.

--NOW--

Finally-- Skyler exhales in dark, horrifying realization, and drops the phone to the ground, staggering back a bit. He trips over his neon blue bean bag, and falls back, onto his shaggy, blue, carpeted floor-- feeling sucker-punched hard in the gut-- as hot, nauseating, paralyzing fear consumes him. He breathes fast, looking down, with crushed and terrified eyes, now seeing the truth-- and that his best friends, and his only true love-- could die.

Dazed and dizzy with aghast panic, his shaking hand scrambles for the phone on the floor. He finds it, swiftly swings it back to his face, and chokes softly into the receiver, still in trembling shock.

"Get out."

Just as Skyler speaks to Zack-- a tall, hooded, white-robed shadow slowly steps up behind a totally lost Zack.

"What?" Zack's not sure if he's hearing Sky correctly, as he continues to admire the pretty, shiny, gold bar in his hand.

Skyler quickly finds his voice, realizing now, that they have only a few moments left, before Nathan figures out-- that they've figured out-- *who he really is.*

"ZACK! GET OUT!" Skyler suddenly shouts fast and frantically, in a feverish frenzy, into his cell phone, *"GET OUT NOW! GET SHY AND EVERYBODY OUT! RUN! IT'S NATHAN!"* --He still can't believe what he's saying--

"NATHAN-- IS THE VALENTINE KILLER!"

CHAPTER [47] MEET THE REAL VALENTINE KILLER

IT'S A NEW DAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-TRUTH MINUTE 40)-- as Laura freaks out in Lissette's vice grip, seeing the sinister shadow, as it steps up behind Zack, in front of the walk-in closet, in Nathan's dark bedroom. Now in awed confusion, Lissette loses her grip on Laura, as the shadow distracts her too. Meanwhile-- Zack snorts at Skyler, with laughing disbelief, still holding the phone to his ear, as the girls-- who are right in front of him, freak out-- at what's behind him.

"Sky, please. Errbody knows Nathan can't walk, hahaha."

Skyler shakes in upset, as he hops back up to his feet, shouting into the phone, to mobilize Zack, "*HE CAN WALK, ZACK! NATHAN CAN WALK! HE CAN JOG-- HE CAN RUN-- HE CAN SWIM-- HE CAN WALK! --AND HE CAN KILL YOU!*"

Lissette gasps in confused awe, still holding Laura in a lightweight headlock, as she gapes up at the shadow, slowly recognizing his face.

"Ay Dios meo! *Nathan-- You can-- walk?*"

Zack finally realizes that Lissette is looking up above him, as screaming Laura struggles to break free from Lissette's grip. So Zack turns, looks at the robed shadowy figure standing behind him, and stares up at him, stunned, as Nathan stands, looking back down upon him, with very *different-- possessed--* eyes.

"Hey Zack." Nathan gazes glacially at him, in a British accent now, "Got rid of my wheelchair. Do ya still think I squeak like nails on a chalkboard?"

Zack realizes, in utter shock, "Whoa. --*Nathan*. --You... --are *British?*"

Nathan smiles coldly at Zack, tilting his head with eerily psychotic detachment. Then he raises his ritual rod--

--and he SLAMS it down on Zack's face--

--knocking Zack down to the ground.

Lissette GASPS in horror, as Laura SCREAMS so loudly that even Steven and Hadji can hear her from the pool outside.

They stop playing waterball, eye each other curiously, and start to get out of the pool, as the dubstep dance music continues playing from the backyard speakers.

Back inside, upstairs, the SCREAMING girls JUMP UP AND RUN around Nathan, in opposite directions. He reaches for Laura and catches her, but Zack grabs Nathan's ankle, making Nathan slip and lose his grip on Laura. Laura gets away. Angered Nathan kicks Zack in the face, knocking him out.

"You were always my least favorite one of the group." Nathan narrows his eyes frostily at Zack's motionless form.

Skyler's heart pounds out of his chest as his voice cracks, hearing the girls SCREAM, "Zah-- Zack? Girls? Are-- you-- OK?"

Sky gulps, almost ready to cry in helpless, nervous fear. But he holds it in, as he hears the phone sound like it's being picked up.

"Hello Skyler." Nathan speaks in a curt, plain, wooden tone.

"Nathan?" Confused Skyler realizes, "You're-- *British*?"

"Yes. I am."

The terse, simple, stiff response from Nathan, almost disturbs Skyler, just as much as finding out-- that he's The Valentine Killer.

--*Almost*.

Skyler's eyes gloss over, glistening, as he realizes the full reality, of this unbelievably massive deception, and profoundly staggering betrayal, "Your-- breathing isn't-- labored."

"No. It's not." He speaks again, in that short, detached, matter of fact mode.

Skyler gulps, closing his eyes in trepidation, as he braces himself for the worst, "Is-- Is everyone-- *OK*?"

Nathan shuffles his breath, shruggishly, "Well Zack's not lookin' too great, but I haven't killed anyone here yet. If that's what you mean."

Skyler intakes a bit of relieved breath, in lost thought, "Ya-- Yet? Wha-- Why yet? You-- You don't have to kill them, Nathan. They didn't do anything. And they're not monsters-- or-- or *martyrs loved by monsters*. Ma-- Monsters hate them. You'd be-- making monsters-- *happy*-- if you killed them--"

"Calm down, Skyler." Nathan snaps in knowing annoyance, at Skyler's obvious concern for his friends-- and his transparent attempt to use psychology to save them, "I know you don't want me to kill your friends. And your girlfriend."

He seems to think about it for a moment, “Though I don’t see why you need her. I thought I gave you enough fulfillment. Arranging your meeting of the other 2 hacker-gamers-- Steven and Hadji-- to round out our group. Before me, it was just you, a proud asshole, and a lovesick thug chick.

“*I’m* the one who gave you The Geek Nite clique, that helped you survive school and enjoy life, while your Dad was busy at work, late at night. *I’m* the one who kept you out of trouble. Stopped you from getting hurt, or hurting others, whenever you *blacked out*. By using *Geek Nite* to *shield* you.

“*I’m* the one who made your crowdfund projects a financial success too. To boost your confidence and skills, when Papa Bear wouldn’t take Baby Bear seriously. *I* did all that. *I’m* the one who cares about you, Skyler. --*Me*. ”

Skyler stares off, into the moon, in floored, and disturbed, discombobulation, “You-- killed Theresa? --The Core 4? --*Why?*”

Nathan sighs, grimly, “Ah yes. *That*.” He sounds flat about it, like it’s the one, dark memory, from all of his psychotic wrongdoing, that he doesn’t really want to remember, “That-- was very unfortunate.”

THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP!

Laura and Lissette FLY down Nathan’s staircase, and race through his house desperately, trying to open the front door. But it won’t open without a key code. Then Laura sees light-weight black workout weights on the floor, picks them up, and throws them at the window by the door. Lissette joins in, helping her throw the light workout weights at the window.

--A window that won’t break.

Laura pulls out a gun and shoots the window. But it ricochets, and they SCREAM, ducking the bullet, as it flings right back past them. Lissette gawks angrily at Laura.

“You had a *gun* ‘n you didn’t pull it out to save *Zack*?”, she glares at her in disbelief.

Laura’s hands shake as she holds the gun, “I thought Nathan was right behind us! I-- I never shot anyone before!”

“Well gimME the gun! *I’ll* shoot him!” Lissette grabs for the gun in Laura’s trembling hands, but still feeling the burn of her blind headlocking vice grip, Laura yanks her gun back, holding it away from her. Lissette just huffs and shakes her head, rolling her eyes.

Then Laura looks at her, realizes something, and narrows her eyes at her. “Wait-- Where’s *your* butcher knife? The weapon *YOU* coulda used to save Zack?”

Lissette looks around and realizes, sheepishly, “Oh-- I-- musta dropped it when Nathan scared-- err-- startled-- me.”

“Uh huh.” Laura cuts her eyes at her, and then commences into freaking out, as she looks around, “Oh my God! We need to key codes to escape and everything’s bulletproof! This place is a fortress! There’s no way out! --Only in.”

Just then, Steven and Hadji open the glass back door, from the swimming pool, laughing loudly about something, as they enter, from the backyard, and Steven picks up Zack’s blue towel from in-between the crack in the door.

Laura and Lissette hear them and the music, suddenly. They gasp, looking at each other, and shout simultaneously.

“THE BACK DOOR’S STILL OPEN!”

The girls run over to the back of the house, toward Steven and Hadji, screaming.

“NO NO NO DON’T CLOSE THE DOOR NO NO NO DON’T TOUCH THE TOWEL!” The girls shout over each other.

But the door closes behind the boys, who look at each other, confused, then alarmed, then worried-- then surprised.

“Whoa, you OK?” Steven eyes them curiously.

Hadji looks twice at Laura, “Holy crap-- *Laura?*” He realizes, stunned, “You’re alive! And you’re-- a *ninja?*” He looks her over, “*HOT.*” He nods, grinning goofily at her.

“NATHAN IS THE VALENTINE KILLER!” Lissette shouts.

“AND THE HOUSE IS A TECHNOLOGICALLY CONTROLLED PRISON!” Laura shouts.

“SO WE’RE TRAPPED!”

“AND NATHAN BEAT UP ZACK!”

“AND HE’S DRESSED LIKE A WEIRD ALBINO MONK-GONE-BAD!”

“AND HE CAN WALK!”

“AND HE CAN TALK WITHOUT ALL THAT WEIRD HEAVY BREATHING!”

“YEAH! --AND HE’S BRITISH!”

Steven and Hadji look at each other, then look back at the girls, and shrug with a nod.

“Yeah, we know.” Hadji smirks.

Laura pulls her gun out on them. They raise their hands, freaked out.

“Holy crap!” Steven drops the ball in his hand to the floor with stunned, wide eyes.

“Whoa whoa whoa it was a *joke*. I was *joking*. We thought you were *joking* so we *joked* back. God. Pulling a gun on me-- *definitely* not hot.” Hadji gawks at her in frightened shock.

“If you’re lying I will shoot you in the face.” Laura says through gritted teeth.

“Thought you were afraid to shoot.” Lissette folds her arms, glaring at her knowingly.

“Oh my God-- *They can hear you.*” Laura gapes at her in disbelief.

“Whatever.” Lissette rolls her eyes, looking away, “These guys are sissies. They aint killas.”

“Jeeze, thanks, Lissette.” Steven looks sincerely hurt.

“Yeah, nice vote of confidence.” Hadji cuts his eyes at her, insulted.

“We need to find a way out of here.” Laura’s voice quivers.

“We need to find as many weapons as possible to defend ourselves with.” Lissette firmly corrects her.

Steven holds up his phone, “ORRR-- we just *“need”* to call 911. If this was all legit-- and you two aren’t just pulling our leg.” But then Steven looks at his phone, and frowns as he tries to press various digits on his phone, “No signal. --That’s weird. My signal was just fine a few minutes ago.”

“Oh my God-- He blocked the network.” Laura cries neurotically.

“Yo, help me collect all the knives, paperweights, glasses, and chemicals!” Lissette directs everybody.

Then she tries to pick up a glass lamp-- but it’s glued to the table. So she darts over to the fireplace, grabs the sharp, crow-bar-like poker in it, finds burnt, bloody clothes in it, picks them up with the poker, and she looks at everyone.

They all look at the burnt, bloody clothes-- then back at Lissette. Lissette drops the poker and the burnt, bloody clothes, back into the fireplace, and they all instantly scatter like scared mice, whimpering around, as they start collectively hunting for weapons.

CHAPTER [48] MEET WEALTH IS GOD

IT'S A NEW DAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-TRUTH MINUTE 30)-- as Skyler tries to email and text message 911, both on his cell phone and on his computer, while on the phone with Nathan, but the network is down, and won't let him in, no matter what he does to hack it, and work his way around it.

"I loved Theresa the way I love you." Nathan explains like it's totally sane, normal, and to be expected.

"Which is... --*sexual*?" Skyler tries to psychoanalyze him, as he hunts for a technological way to get help.

"Sexual. Familial. Intellectual. Religious. As my lover. My sibling. My friend. My god. I love you both in all those ways. My love has no boundaries." Nathan says it like he's describing something wonderful-- or healthy-- or sane.

"I loved my twin brother and sister the same way. We were best friends, worshipped idols, blood relatives, and sexual lovers. Before the gods of the universe murdered them on Christmas Day. To punish me for running away. And make an example of me to the others-- who didn't run-- I suppose.

“I tried to take my siblings with me. But... they were too brainwashed-- and loyal to the very people who tortured and killed them last holiday. Shortly before I became-- The Valentine Killer.”

Skyler gulps, closing his eyes, taking it all in.

Nathan thinks. “Funny how much our societies pretend to care about us kids-- yet they don’t give a fig about who adopts us, raises us, and programs us-- to be all the things-- that slowly rip a society apart-- at the seams.”

Sky clears his throat, disgusted, “Um-- Yeah-- That’s, interesting-- Nathan...”

Nathan scoffs, irritated, “Oh don’t patronize me, Skyler. I know you don’t bat for the same team. Your religion and biological instincts won’t let you morally approve of incest and homosexuality, like we do. I know that. I profiled you quite thoroughly.

“And don’t worry. I’m not proud of what they turned me and my family into. I knew it was hideous when no one else did. I know I wasn’t born this way. Though I’m sure some are. I’d bet the farm most are not. Our minds have been-- *warped*.

“Well. Point is-- I won’t try to turn you out, or-- socially bully you for approval. I know all about how your God morally outlaws incest. And condemns homosexual behavior as the only abomination in Scripture-- The direct slap against God’s creation. Because it can’t create new life.

“Instead, it spawns the death of life. Immediately perverting the biological purpose of life. So according to The Christian Bible, The Jewish Torah, and even Muslim’s Islamic doctrine-- my behavior with my family is profoundly offensive, --and deeply wrong.

“Like defecating on fine art. Or stabbing the original print of a classic art piece. Til it’s... disfigured-- and completely... unrecognizable.

“A condescending elitist liberal art snob would *BAN YOU* from the *building*, if you did such a thing to a *MAN*-made piece of beloved art work. But if you do it to *GOD*-made art work, or *NATURE’S* art-- and regress our whole species-- supporting extinctionist behavior, that seeks to destroy our entire human race, *THEN* suddenly, *SOMEHOW-- THAT’S PROGRESS*.

“Something to *celebrate*. With *pride*. Degenerating the existence, purpose and technology of man. Killing the healthy reproduction of new life together-- between man and woman. Plus and minus. Yin and yang. The innie and the outty. A positive and a negative charge. You get the drift.

“Doubling up, in destructively self-serving, lopsided imbalance, makes no logical sense. It is not *progress*. It is *regress*. After all, if we were *ALL* gay or incestuous-- we’d end the world, wouldn’t we? With the extinction of mankind. *IN*-breeding and *NO* breeding-- until there’s no one left to carry on the legacy of our human race.

“Which, of course, is what the Rich Bastard *Powers That Be* have always wanted: *Population Control*. So I know what you’ll say, Skyler. Be it the “same-gender sex love” of homosexuals-- or the “same-blood sex love” of incestors. Same this-- same that. Either way-- Your God morally hates biological narcissism. As does nature. As proven by science. *Procreatively* speaking.

“I did a lot of homework studying the religion that *The Gods of The Universe* mock most. And you can thank years of childhood abuse from them for my *spastic* lack of... boundaries-- and broken inability to connect all those, *instinctively* moral and logical dots, that you seem to come by so easily.

“Of course you could always just pray for me. I dunno if your God really exists, but if you do, you can hold a prayer circle, and see what happens. See if you can turn all us sexually inward *takers*-- back into sexually outward *givers*.

“After all-- if God can make the blind see, the cripple walk, and the cancerous cancer-free-- then He sure as bloody hell can make the gay, bi, and incestuous-- straight, decisive, and less *lazy*. ”

Skyler gawks to himself, confoundedly trapped in silent disbelief, “You’re-- a *serial killer*-- Nathan. Why are you talking to me about *sex* when-- you *serial kill* people, Nathan? I-- I think-- that-- while-- probably not *proud* of your sexual-- past-- God is-- most *urgently* upset, with your most current habit-- of *serial killing* people-- Nathan.”

Nathan mocks him, but in a serious way, as if he means it, in a sudden American accent, sounding eerily like Skyler, “But Skyler-- *Sex is a big deal. If sex wasn’t a big deal, then rape and adultery wouldn’t be. That’s how you know something is a big deal. When stealing it-- feels like an epic crime-- or a powerful loss.* ”

“You--”, Skyler stops short, flashing back to Shyanne in his bedroom, the night they first kissed, when he said those exact words to her, that Nathan is now repeating back to him.

*“Did you see my white Cross key chain?” He asked her.
She looked behind him, furrowing her brow, with concern, and said, “Did I just see someone walk past your doorway?”*

Then he recalls Steven and Zack, back in Lissette’s hospital room.

“I gotta take a leak--” Steven threw his cards down, disgusted by everything and everyone.

Zack snorted, “Don’t fall in and disappear into the land of Narnia, like Nathan does. Though I gotta admit, it was kind of hilarious, watching the skeleton staff go crazy last night, trying to figure out which bathroom his wheels got stuck in, hahaha.” Zack busted out laughing at the thought.

Then he recalls Shyanne in his bedroom again, “Haha, aw, I love Einstein! He’s so sweet!” Shy played with Sky’s happy dog who licked her hands, all friendly.

“Yeah. He’s a pushover.” Skyler had said to her, *“Not much of a watch dog. Feed him a tasty chew stick and he’ll roll right over for you.” Sky threw Einstein a chew stick with a smirk, and Einstein instantly grabbed it, and rolled over, for him to rub his belly, adorably, “Haha-- nah, we love Einstein. He’s a good dog. Always finds my missing shoes.” He chuckled, rubbing Einstein’s belly, and tossed his bag of doggy chew sticks onto the shelf by his bed.*

Then, later, he woke up, beside Shy, saw Einstein wagging his tail, belly up, at the foot of his bed, chewing on a brand new chew stick, and he looked up, seeing that the sticks were still on the shelf above his bed.

“How’d you get into those snacks, boy?” He said to him.

Then Sky imagines a cloaked, dark-hooded Nathan sneaking into his bedroom, while he was sleeping next to Shy, grabbing a chew stick from the bag on the shelf, and feeding it to Einstein, who wagged his tail and rolled over for him, as Nathan admired sleeping Skyler, scowled at sleeping Shyanne, then leaned over both of them-- --and took Skyler’s white Cross key chain from his bed.

Skyler’s eyes widen in creeped out shock, “You were there. In my room. Shy wasn’t pretending to see someone walk past my bedroom door. She really did see someone there. She caught a glimpse of *YOU*. But she didn’t recognize you-- because you weren’t in a wheelchair. So she really *didn’t* take my Cross. *You* did. You were-- *watching* us.”

Nathan’s voice is grinning, relishing Sky’s realization, “Always. I figured, if you were going to take your eyes off the prize, of getting full and proper retribution for your Mother and brother’s murders, by getting distracted with this new girl in your life.

“I might as well remind you of your original task and purpose. The one of seeking justice for your family. By hiding your Mother’s Cross from you. Until you’re ready to get down to business for her, that is.”

He thinks about it and smirks slightly, “But after seeing you work your magic on Miss Valentine, I must say, Skyler-- You’re quite gifted at the art of seduction. People don’t give you nearly enough credit.”

Sky suddenly feels queezy, in addition to unnerved and focused on trying to get his network back up, so he can call for outside help, “OK. That’s-- great. But you know you’re just deflecting from the more pressing issue here, Nathan.”

“Which is?” Nathan sounds genuinely curious.

Skyler is stunned by his curiosity, “That LIFE is a big deal, Nathan. LIFE is ALSO a big deal. If LIFE wasn’t a big deal, then MURDER wouldn’t be a big deal. That’s how you know LIFE’S a big deal too. When stealing it-- feels like an epic crime-- or a powerful loss.”

“Alright. Think fast. Which is worse? Rape or murder?”

“I, it, what? They’re both horrible.” Skyler doesn’t understand this new game Nathan’s playing with him. And he’s getting frustrated, trying to figure out why, for the first-- and worst-- time in his life-- he can’t get this network back up and running, on his computer. Right in front of him. At his desk. No matter how many shortcuts he takes, tricks he makes, and laws he breaks, to access a network-- *ANY* network.

“Ah, yes, but which is worse?” The smile in Nathan’s voice is evident-- He’s enjoying bringing Skyler into his world-- and mind. His disturbed, twisted mind. “Ending life-- or torturing it? Releasing someone’s soul-- or violating it?”

Sky realizes in concerned disbelief, “Re-- Releasing? Is that what you think you’re doing, Nathan? You think you’re-- *releasing* people? Is that why you-- don’t feel bad? You think you’re ‘releasing’ martyrs from being-- *loved* by-- *monsters*?”

“That’s one way of looking at it.” He sounds eerily chipper about it.

“Nathan-- That’s sick-- You’re-- You are taking their most precious gift away from them-- *LIFE*-- just because --you’re mad at-- *somebody else!* I mean, the *least* you could do is only kill the people who *did you wrong*. But-- you’re going around-- hurting people who never did *crap* to you. Just to torture the people who *did!*”

“Ahhh-- And there we have it.” Nathan coos, “*Torture-- PROPER torture-- is worse-- than death*. Why would I release the people who’ve “*done me wrong*”, when I’m not finished torturing them yet? Hmm? Imagine you were raped Skyler--”

Sky jolts back slightly, shaking his head with a grossed out scowl, “I’d rather not--”

“No, no-- hear me out.” Nathan sounds oddly normal, “Imagine someone raped you and your whole family-- for years. They even raped your kids. And you were given the choice-- to kill them on the spot, or first-- make them a dribbling vegetable for the rest of their life-- Trapped in a useless body. For decades. Unable to move, talk, anything. THEN they die. Which punishment would you rather give your rapist?”

“I-- Nathan-- That’s-- messed up.”

How is he supposed to respond to that?

How do you answer something like that?

Nathan presses the question, with an eerily lilting voice, “Which one?”

Skyler thinks, and gulps, “The-- 2nd one. I-- guess...”

“Mmm. Exactly.” Nathan sounds like he’s nodding, “Tis not enough to end the life of your rapist. Who raped your family. No. Simply ending them-- would be too easy. Too kind. You must violate them back first. Torture them. The way they violated and tortured you. Make them SUFFER. Cause ya see Skyler, there *are* noble deaths. But there are *no* noble rapes.

“So I will not give our rapists the *nobility* of a swift, easy, romantic *death*. But I *will* give them the *torture* of a long, hard, humiliating *life*. You on the other hand-- You’d make a *great* monster slayer.

“For those *stubborn* monsters I find. Who don’t love *anyone*. Who don’t *care* when you hurt them. Because *nothing* hurts them. *Those* monsters, *you* should take care of, Sky. I think you’d be very *good*-- at *slaying* those *monsters*. ” He pauses, “The monsters who feel *NOTHING*.”

Sky thinks in floored, confused disbelief, “You-- mean-- *kill*? Nathan-- I’m not gonna join you on-- *Adventures in Serial Killing*. My name is *SKYLER*-- *not DEXTER*. And you can’t use your unhealthy sexual urges-- or revenge torture talk-- as a distraction away from the messed up fact-- *that your murderous urges are BAD-- and have to STOP*. ”

Sky wonders, since he’s not getting anywhere with this online network access, if maybe having Nathan’s admiration, might grant him the possible power of guiding his... crazy-ass back towards some iota of sanity. --Or at least get him to NOT murder all of his friends and girlfriend tonight.

Nathan scoffs, giving up, “Oh. Well. I can fix my sexual urges much faster than my murderous ones. I don’t need sex. But I do need to kill. I was just trying to give you a project we could work on together, that I thought could actually be doable. Like a *bonding* exercise for us. But no.

“Sorry Skyler Stone. I’m a human hunter for life. Whether by nurture or nature-- I have an unquenchable thirst for manhunts and retribution. To punish the monsters who took my loved ones from me. By taking theirs from them. And one day-- their ability to commit suicide, or enjoy what’s left of their vile lives, as well.

“Step 1-- You give them spiritual and emotional loss, followed by public and private fear.

“Step 2-- You give them social and financial loss, alongside public humiliation.

“Step 3-- You give them mental and physical loss, after private humiliation.

“Step 4-- You give them the mercy of death.

“Step 5-- You move on with your life.

--Eye for an eye. Right?

“But Theresa and The Core 4 were never monsters *or* loved by monsters.” Skyler points out, still trying to understand why he murdered them-- assuming he did, because, well-- why else would they be dead? “They *hated* them. You gave the monsters *exactly* what they wanted when you killed them.”

“Well... --As I said.” Nathan’s voice goes morose again, “--That was very unfortunate. --And... *unexpected*. Their deaths were *never* in my plan.”

CHAPTER [49] MEET THE TRAP

IT'S A NEW DAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-TRUTH MINUTE 20)-- as Lissette, Steven, Laura and Hadji all regroup, in front of the big screen TV and fireplace, with what they found. Lissette's got a bigger butcher knife. Hadji's got a big baseball bat. Steven's got a big black trash bag-- and the fireplace poker that Lissette found. Laura's got a big can of bug spray-- and her gun. They eye each other like warriors.

"OK guys--" Lissette looks at them all, "You ready?"

They all nod, FIERCELY. Then the air conditioner turns on loudly, and they all SCREAM AND JUMP, freaked out by it, as they raise their weapons up fast, except for Lissette.

They realize it's just the AC, and clear their throats. Lissette glares at them all, like she hates them, shaking her head in disgust, as she walks strong ahead of them, to the stairs. They follow her, eyeing each other-- embarrassed.

“What happened that night?” Skyler pulls out all of the cell phones in his bedroom, and tries to hotwire all of them-- any of them-- into working. “Why did all the people that you rescued *die*, on the same night that you rescued them? --*How?*”

“Oh--”, Nathan sounds genuinely surprised, “*Laura* didn’t bother to email you the whole video when she-- *FINALLY*... stole it back from me tonight? And after you left her such a *compelling* voicemail, a few weeks ago. --*Goodness*.”

“What was the point of her constantly following me around everywhere, just to find where I hid her original copy of the school pool security cam video, which I *easily* stole from her, *digitally*-- by merely *hacking* into their network-- if she wasn’t going to *share* it the moment she got it *back*?

“Ah-- That’s right. Lissette intercepted it. Yet again. Good ole Lissette. Always assisting me-- and never even knowing it. Ballsy chick. *Laura*, on the other hand, is not quite as brave a ninja as you might think. She had a million chances to take me out-- and she never did. I guess all the fight training in the world doesn’t matter. You either have the capacity to kill-- or you don’t.

Zack awakens on Nathan’s bed, in the dim-lit room, as Nathan packs a box full of Valentine Killer newspaper clips into a duffle bag of money, food, and clothes, under the ceiling light, of his open, walk-in closet. Nathan talks to Skyler now, through a remote control patch, that’s Velcroed to his wrist. Zack tries to get up, but then realizes that he’s handcuffed to Nathan’s bed, and he smacks his head back against the pillow in frustrated fear, as his bruised face and head, throb in beating pain.

Outside of the room, Lissette, Laura, Steven and Hadji sneak quietly up the stairs and down the hall. Slowly, they peek inside of Nathan's bedroom doorway, and see the light from the closet reveal a handcuffed Zack on the bed, as Nathan packs in his closet.

Heavy Hadji steps on a floorboard that creaks. So all of them quickly gasp, hiding back away from the doorway. Zack pretends to sleep again, as Nathan looks up at unconscious-looking Zack, then back at the doorway, which looks vacant.

Nathan pushes a button on his wrist patch, and the bedroom door immediately closes and locks, remotely. Zack looks at the door with wide eyes, freaked out, as the group looks out of sorts. Nathan starts to look over again at Zack, who plays knocked out again, and he gazes wickedly at him.

"Don't get any ideas now, Zack. I've got great plans of torture in store for you. Be rest assured. I shan't let you die a clueless soul. You will be rudely awakened--

--before I end your life..."

Nathan laughs with an abrupt, and psychotically hysterical cackle, that he apparently can't control-- or doesn't want to-- as he resumes packing his duffle bag.

Zack opens his eyes and gasps, staring up at the ceiling in horrified panic. Not simply at the terrifying words and shrill laughter uttered by Nathan--

--but at all the giant print photos of dead bodies pasted all over the ceiling above Nathan's bed. Zack trembles in sheer terror, as he recognizes a few of the drowned corpses up on The Valentine Killer's ceiling of martyrs--

--including Nelson Hart, Mary Meeks, and Abraham Davis.

There was only one victim whose photo was missing--

--Theresa Thompson.

Sky tries a myriad of ways to get his network online, going through his 99 cell phones, trying to make one work.

“Oh and you may as well stop trying to call for help.” Nathan informs him pleasantly, “I blocked every single network, device, and access point in your home. And I convinced you to sell your ham radio, a while ago, just in case this very thing might happen.”

Skyler closes his eyes, dropping his head in his hands, sighs in realization, and rushes out of his room, quietly.

Then Sky stealthily rushes into his Dad’s bedroom, sneaks into his closet, reaches quietly for a long box on the top shelf, opens it, and pulls out a rifle with bullets.

“Looking for Daddy’s secret assault rifle with the perfect shot now, are we? Gonna try and ambush me, Skyler? I know your moves. I have every ounce of your landscape visually and audibly monitored 24/7. I can see and hear everything you do. Everywhere you are. At all times. And if you bring that gun-- or any other deadly weapon with you when you come over tonight, which I assume you will do, --I will start killing your friends.” Nathan assures him.

Sky thinks and puts his Dad’s gun down, as Nathan talks.

“Though I must say, some of the premarital conduct I see going on between Daddy Stone and Agent Diaz, --not exactly... Christian. But I’m impressed by how you and Shy actually try to honor your values. Though I notice how you cleverly push the envelope without dropping it. But compared to your Dad and me, I guess you and Shy are the closest examples, of the good Christian heroes, that the Bible asks us to be.”

Sky looks up, sees tiny cameras on his Father’s ceiling fan, and-- as he looks a little closer-- all over the room.

Nathan watches Sky on his Velcroed wrist-patch screen, smiling and shaking his head at him, as he rolls his eyes.

Skyler scowls at him, through the video on his wrist patch, "Don't put my Dad and your name in the same breath. He's not a murderer."

"Oh no--" Nathan shrugs teasingly, "Just a cover-upper for *your* justified murder. And a shooter of certain criminals who ran away from the police. Maybe he didn't kill the guy, like most cops do, but he did paralyze him for life. And the guy wasn't guilty.

"Well I mean, he sold pot. But c'mon. It wasn't *CRACK*. And he wasn't even the violent guy they were after. Course ya could argue-- he was told not to move, then he disobeyed and ran any way. Everyone knows that gets you shot. But then one can argue-- *SHOULD* that get you shot? Why don't cops just taze or tranquilize unarmed suspects? Why must they always *shoot* people before even knowing if they did anything *wrong*?

"Then shooting people in the *back*? *The chest*? *The head*? What? Are none of them trained to shoot people in the *thigh*? *Or the foot*? Do they need to trade their reckless hand-guns in for sharp-shooting assault rifles?

"Or perhaps letting too many people *live* is too much *paperwork*? Then perhaps an oversight office inside every police station should be tasked with the paperwork of every civilian conflict-- to ensure that *EVERYONE'S* lives matter-- *more* than a few pieces of *copy paper* and an *ink jet cartridge*." He scoffs, "--*Monsters*."

"My Dad hasn't been a beat cop for years. He's a detective now."

Not knowing how long he'll be alone-- or if he will ever be coming back-- Skyler, pours a bunch of water, and a heaping bowl full of dog food, into Einstein's dish, in the kitchen, and then he magnetizes a note for his Dad on the fridge, counter and front door of the house-- for good measure--, as he leaves the house.

Nathan finishes packing, then he goes to the bathroom, inside his bedroom, and exits the other bathroom door, into another adjoining bedroom-- with a tranquilizer gun. Nathan quietly cracks the door of a guest bedroom open, and peeks into the hallway. He sees Lissette, Laura, Steven and Hadji stand like scared statues, all staring fiercely at his locked bedroom door, down the hall-- with weapons ready.

Nathan opens the door further-- raising his tranquilizer gun. Steven looks, realizing someone's there-- someone who's pointing a gun at them. Steven GASPS, moving to alarm the others. But Nathan *shoots* a tranquilizer dart into his neck, before he can call attention to Nathan.

THUMP!

Laura, Hadji, and Lissette turn, to see Steven on the ground. Confused and stunned, they look up and see Nathan. But before they can process it-- Nathan SHOTS them too.

--And they all fall down.

IT'S A NEW DAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-TRUTH MINUTE 10)-- as Sky walks his black and neon orange motorcycle, briskly down his upper middle class, suburban, neighborhood road-- now wearing his black and neon orange leather motorcycle jacket, with a neon blue Bluetooth in his ear, as he breathes in the crisp, fresh night air, and chews on his now-flavorless, peppermint bubblegum. The late fall breeze cuts the smell of thick, wet, heavy humidity in half as the wind slowly drifts into winter.

All he hears are the dull, monotonous, rhythmic chirping and croaking ribbit sounds, of various crickets and frogs, hiding in the trees, grass and bushes everywhere, as the soft, warm glow of steady yellow lamp light, and the faint, cool glow of flickering blue TV screen light-- emanate from the family room and bedroom windows, of a few other houses, on his homey little street. Other than the family of 3 that laughs together, at a sitcom on their livingroom television--

It's so quiet.

So peaceful.

You'd never know there was a teenager outside, walking his motorcycle down the lane, to go save his only friends, and first love, from a deranged, infamous serial killer.

For a moment, Skyler suddenly feels at peace, knowing that he's probably walking to his death.

He also feels acutely alone in the world right now.

But then again, on some level--

Skyler always felt alone in the world.

Ever since he was 6.

But this is different. This is deeper. This is spiritual. Before, it was more external. His outer experience alone-- instantly alienated him from the rest of the world.

But now-- he's feeling more than just alone with confusion, fear, and hidden angels. Now he's feeling alone with God. Like somehow, he's silently having a direct conversation with The Divine Force that created him.

--The Force that he'll soon meet, by the end of tonight.

And the serene peace of knowing that he will be with his Mother and brother again, by the end of the evening, somehow supersedes the fear, pain, and loss of losing them, that has plagued his psyche-- and his life-- for so long.

He lets this blanket of supreme peace envelop him, and then he begins to say a prayer to his Maker, as he walks.

"Our Father," Skyler quietly petitions, "--Who art in heaven-- Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. --On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us of our trespasses; as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen."

He's said The Lord's Prayer many countless times before. But now, suddenly, he's listening to his words.

He understands them now.

So he means them now.

So he believes them, in the full force of his faith now.

He licks his dry lips, and suddenly realizes--

--He's not biting the inside of his mouth.

Did his faith conquer his fear?

Or was it the fact, that Nathan is not a cop, that didn't revert Sky back to his 6-year-old-trauma-victim self?

Skyler's not sure. All he knows is that he's just now realizing, that he's heard a lot of silence and shuffling on the other end of the line, during the start of his walk.

"Hey-- Ya-- Ya still there?" He huffs into the Bluetooth in his ear, as he bops down the street, gripping the handles on his bike tight-- and guiding it swiftly along the path.

"Of course." Nathan quickly answers, "Just had to put a few Reno 911's out of their misery."

Skyler stops, "Wha-- whado you mean?"

Just then, Sky's neighbor-- a frowning old lady in a floral, white and blue, granny robe and slippers-- slowly staggers out of her house on a cane. She bends down, picks up a newspaper, and smiles bright when she sees Skyler, waving hello to him, warmly. Skyler thinks about this.

"Relax. I haven't killed them yet. I see you're upwardly mobile though." Nathan warns him, "But no point going to the neighbors for help either. I jammed all their networks and landlines too. And anyone you talk to personally-- I will have to kill. --*Including that sweet old lady you're looking at right now, in the white and blue floral bath robe.*"

Sky gulps, waves his silent hello to the sweet old lady, with a friendly smile, and resumes walking his bike down the street. She nods, turns, and goes back inside, grinning from ear to ear at his attention-- totally aloof to his peril.

"Figured." Skyler chokes, as he walks, "Nathan-- you seem like-- you know what you're doing. And you do everything for a reason. With a purpose and a plan. So why are you-- breaking your own code to-- hurt our-- err-- *my*-- friends?"

"I have more work to do, Skyler. And it's more important for me to take down the gods of the universe, than it is for your friends to live."

"OK. So what if-- we help you? What if we, keep our mouths shut and, help you take down our-- common enemy? We're on the same side, Nathan."

"No one's on my side." The suddenly hostile edge in Nathan's voice startles Skyler, "My side's alone. The only ones who were ever on my side, were my twin sister and brother. Who all saw what I saw. And did what I did. And they're gone. So my side always is-- and will be-- *alone*."

Skyler nods nervously, realizing, and rushes his bike down the street faster, "OK. OK. Um-- alright. We're... not on the same side-- in your view. I get it. That's-- cool. But... we both hate the same bad guys. We both share the same *passion* for crushing a dangerous cult. So why don't ya just-- let us work with you? Or-- *for you*? Til we-- get rid of them? --Together?"

Nathan pauses for a long beat. Then finally, he says, "The fact that you think, I'm stupid enough to believe, that you, and all your sheltered, geektacular, suburbanite friends, would feel no moral objection, to me murdering innocent souls, whose only guilt, is being loved by bad people, just so I can prove a point, --deeply offends me."

And with that--

--Nathan hangs up.

Skyler freaks out, checking his phone for a connection, “Nay-- Nathan? NATHAN! HEY! --*SHIT*.” He realizes he’s lost him, so he jumps on his motorcycle, jams his black and neon orange helmet onto his head, revs his bike up, and races down the street, with a loud ROAR THROUGH THE WIND.

CHAPTER [50] MEET THE TRUTH

IT'S A NEW DAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-TRUTH MINUTE 5)--
as Lissette starts to awaken, seeing herself, Steven, Hadji, Zack, and
Laura, all tied up to red, white and gold beach chairs, bound and
gagged, only an inch away from the deep end of Nathan's secret, 30-
feet-deep, indoor swimming pool.

It smells like chlorine and water, as the jacuzzi whirlpool and sauna
behind them, warm up the tall room, with a humid heat that makes
everybody sweat. It also smells like fresh paint. As if it was just
recently airbrushed-- a ruby red ground, yellow gold walls, and
diamond white ceiling.

--The school colors.

--To make the room look like the school swimming pool.

--Where Theresa and The Core 4 died.

Lissette realizes this, gasps, and spits out her gag, looking all
around her, in slight hyperventilation, as Nathan watches Shy shake
violently, in one of her prophet fits, on the bathroom floor, via the
video screen of his wrist patch.

"What a strange girl." He raises his eyebrow at her bizarre behavior.

“Why are you doing this??” The confused hurt in Lissette’s voice has a life of its own, as she unknowingly distracts Nathan away from his reality TV show, of watching Shyanne spaz out in his bathroom.

“Oh my God, I’m so *SICK* of hearing that.” Off-kilter Nathan is genuinely exasperated, “Why do you *THINK*, Lissette? You all... are in... the way. And quiet as it’s kept-- the only real loss here would be Skyler. And possibly that odd prophet seizure girl. The rest of you are painfully average. Ya never think outside the box. All of you. You’re maddeningly void of any remarkable creative intelligence or original thought.”

“Yeah cause killin’ people, *DESTROYING* creation-- *THAT’S* creative, original thought.” Lissette rolls her eyes.

“Maybe not the act itself. But when it comes to *who* I kill, *how* I kill, and *why* I kill-- yes, Lissette. I’d say I’m *quite*-- the *creative*, with *exquisite original thought*. ”

Skyler races his motorcycle into Nathan’s backyard, as Lecrae’s “Confe\$\$ions” plays from the speakers, and he slows down, as he reaches the glass back door. He jumps off, removes his helmet, and puts the bike on its kickstand.

Inside, Sky opens the door, and notices electric sensors and high-tech locks everywhere. He quickly stops the door from closing-- just in time, goes back outside, gets a pool chair with a tall potted plant, and leaves them both wedged in between the door, to make it stay open.

Skyler looks at the inlet of the door frame, where the door shuts and locks. He touches the gold inlet frame that protrudes out on either side of the door frame, and he makes a mental note of it.

Lisette cries angrily at Nathan, “We didn’t do *anything* to you! We liked you! We coulda had your *back!*”

Nathan finishes lighting big, thick, blood red candles, all around Lisette, Zack, Steven, Hadji, and Laura.

“Yes, I’m sure you’re all just *dying* to throw your lives away-- for a morally preachy psycho with a grudge.”

Then he injects the 5 of them with more tranquilizers-- knocking them all completely out.

IT’S A NEW DAY (COUNTDOWN-TO-TRUTH MINUTE 00:00:00)-- as Skyler enters Nathan’s house, and a fiber optic lens scans his eyes and fingerprints, then turns on the big screen TV. Sky stops, watches-- and he sees the whole Core 4 Death Video play out. -- But this time, when the cops exit--

--*Nathan wheels in.*

He rolled his electric wheelchair over to the pool, set his cell phone on the table, and threw a rope into the pool.

Slowly, the rope jerked, and Theresa started climbing it, out of the pool, followed by Mary, Abraham and Nelson. They were all wearing camouflage oxygen masks, with tanks that they threw back into the water, as they came out, holding their now-untied ankle weights. They all high-fived and hugged Nathan.

“Ahh, man, thank you.” Nelson nodded gleefully, “You really saved our lives tonight, man.”

“Yeah,” Abraham nodded, emotionally exhausted, “I wasn’t even sure if the tanks could do all that. How’d they camouflage so well and not bubble up?”

“It’s a lucky miracle you had some idea, how and where they’d be throwing us in. Like you’ve been through this before or something.” Mary laughed.

“Thank you so much, Nathan.” Theresa hugged Nathan.

But seeking more than a hug, Nathan pulled Theresa in for a kiss, startling her. Pulling away, she looked at Abraham, who eyed Nathan tentatively-- and fiercely.

"Um... Yeah... So..." Theresa tried to play it off and act like it was just a friendly gesture, touching Abraham's stomach discretely, to silence him, "Now all we have to do, is go into hiding, so they think we're dead-- and we live again."

Three of her Core 4 all looked at her, confused. She gave them a "hush" look.

"Cool. I'll go get the wine outside." Nathan wheeled out, leaving his phone on the table. Everyone looked at Theresa, puzzled.

"Theresa?" Mary sounded curious in a mischievous way, "Why didn't you mention to Nathan, the secret backup file you have on the case, that we're all going to release to the media, um, as soon as we leave here?"

Theresa eyed her seriously, "Cause. I think... well... I think Nathan's the Valentine Killer." She blurted out.

Everybody stared at her, then looked at each other-- and then bursted out laughing.

"What are you talkin' about, Theresa? He's in a wheelchair." Nelson scoffed, shaking his head.

Theresa glanced back at the pool door cautiously, and spoke softly to them, in a hushed tone, "I think he's the same guy running the support group online. It's hard to tell, cause he's always covered up in the video chat. But it sounds like his voice. One girl even met P. Roof-- in person.

"At the abandoned building that some of the rest of us have been meeting at. At first I didn't believe her, cause, well-- why would he only Skype *the group*, but then actually go jog with *her* alone? Then I found out she's the daughter of a police commissioner in the *Whites Are God* cult. He plans to kill her. As a martyr loved by a monster."

Abe eyed her skeptically, incapable of seeing this twerp as a socially skilled, or physically dynamic, serial life extinguisher, “I dunno, Theresa. I can tell the kid is *off*. But *serial killer* off? That’s-- like-- *REALLY* freakin’ off.”

Mary fell in line with Theresa, just on her word, not convinced it was true, but willing to play along, just to be on the safe side, “So then, what do we do with him? I mean, he like, JUST saved our lives.

“Just play it cool, be nice to him, and make him feel a part of things.” Theresa instructed, “Maybe relate to him any stories you might have of when you were bullied.”

“Oh you mean like last week?” Nelson smirked.

“Oh you mean like 15 minutes ago?” Abraham reminded him.

They all laughed darkly.

“Still though. I can’t believe it worked. I was seriously terrified.” -- But Mary still looked terrified.

Maybe because she knew that they were supposed to be dead-- And whether it be the practical, tangible fear, of getting shot by a dirty cop, as soon as they stepped foot outside of that room-- or the ethereal, intangible fear, of simply getting killed by any means necessary, to bring balance back to the universe-- because they just cheated death-- and death wasn’t going to accept that--

--Like in Final Destination--

--Something inside Mary Meeks sounded like it knew that, no matter what they weren’t going to make it beyond that day--

--*alive*.

“Yeah but who’s gonna believe us?” Abraham shrugged coolly, “I mean, our files are damning. But how do we prove what they did tonight?”

“Laura.” Theresa looked over at Laura’s locker.

“Who? Lifeguard Laura? Why?” Nelson glanced at her locker too.

“Before I came in here I saw her Dad install secret cameras everywhere.” Theresa looked directly into the camera, nodding at it.

Mary laughed, “What? Why?”

“To catch The Locker Stink Bomber. He was all tough too, like, “Nobody messes with my baby girl” haha. --I could only *WISH* my Dad ever gave that much of a crap about *ME*.” Theresa looked down, sadly.

“Aw, Theresa.” Mary put her hand on hers, compassionately.

“We give a crap about you, Theresa.” Nelson chuckled.

“More than that. I give a whole sewage maintenance department about you, girl.” Abraham said with a straight face-- and then teased her, “Come give yo secret Sanitation Domination lovah some sugah. C’mon. Come to big Daddy!”

He laughed and she giggled, as their chairs scraped the ground, moving with Abe, as he prowled over to Theresa teasingly, with a mischievous grin. She backed up, shaking her head with her hands up, laughing.

“No-- Abraham-- Don’t you throw me back in-- Abraham-- Hey-- No--”

“Come on! Come to Daddy! Haha! Let’s see if we can survive a 2nd time!”

“Least ya know you can breathe now!” Nelson laughed.

“That’s not the point! Hey, haha-- Abraham! NO!”

Theresa screamed playfully as Abe picked her up and jumped into the pool with her.

SPLASH!

Everybody laughed as they popped back up, out of the water. She splashed him. He splashed her. Then he kissed her. Nelson and Mary made funny ooing sounds as Nathan wheeled back into the room with the wine.

CRASH!

They all abruptly stopped laughing and joking, with a gasp, as they looked over to see Nathan, who just slammed the wine bottle to the ground, shattering it to pieces. Theresa pulled away from Abraham, as Nathan wheeled up to the table. Abraham pulled her back, but she resisted, to swim over to the pool edge, over to Nathan.

“No, babe, he needs to know. He can’t claim you when you were never his, and you belong to someone else.” He implored.

“I know--”, but she kept floating over to Nathan.

Theresa was trying to coddle Nathan-- Skyler realizes to himself, surprised to know that she even knew how to do that, considering how rigidly walled off she had been to Sky, only a couple years earlier... -- But here she was, on this video, trying to pander to Nathan’s clear and obvious delusion-- probably to keep him from snapping and murdering them all.

--So much for that.

“Nathan?” Theresa gazed sympathetically at him, “--Hey. Can we talk?”

But Nathan merely grabbed his cell phone, rewound it, and played it back, for them all to hear-- the entire conversation they just had, up until Abraham mentioned being “bullied 15 minutes ago”, followed by their laughter. Nathan turned his recording off, clicked his bluetooth, and everyone looked either scared, curious, or confused.

“So-- You were-- eavesdropping-- on your cell phone’s live recording-- of our private talk-- through your shady bluetooth?” Abraham was trying to wrap his mind around this.

Nathan glared murderously at Abraham-- and then at Theresa, “You let me think you liked me.”

Abraham closed his eyes with a knowing sigh, “God, Theresa. I told you he was getting the wrong idea.”

“You don’t have the skills and wealth that I can provide for Theresa. You’re not good enough for her.” Nathan growled.

Mary smirked, "Says the stalker who's not a walker."

Everyone looked at Mary, surprised.

"Mary!" Theresa chided.

"What?" Mary looked at her, annoyed by Nathan, "It's true. I mean-- how dare he flaunt all his *WONDERFUL* wealth in our faces, and tell Abe that he's not good enough for you, when he himself can't even stand up! Cocky little runt."

Well that was clearly the wrong thing to say.

And perhaps that's how Mary enigmatically knew they were still gonna die that day.

Because she helped make it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

And so saying-- seething Nathan slowly stood up from his wheelchair--

--with a newly cold look in his eyes.

Everyone gasped in confused and terrified shock.

"Holy shit..." Nelson gawked at Nathan in newfound horror, "-- You *ARE* The Valentine Killer..."

"Yes." Nathan said simply, in his British accent now, "And Theresa belongs to me."

Nathan pulled out his tranquilizer gun and SHOT Abraham in the heart with it. A thin needle penetrated Abe... --as he PASSED OUT in the water, and sank to the bottom of the 30 foot pool. Theresa SCREAMED and swam down to save him, struggling to pull him back up to the surface.

Nelson and Mary SCREAMED and tried to swarm Nathan, but he shot them on impulse and they fell into the water, sinking, knocked out, and drowning. Theresa jumped out of the water, crying and screaming at Nathan.

“WHAT DID YOU DO??! WHAT ARE YOU DOING??!
PLEASE! STOP THIS! I’LL BE YOUR GIRLFRIEND NATHAN!
JUS PLEASE! SAVE THEM! HELP ME SAVE THEM!!!”

“It’s better this way.” Nathan said serenely, “Now we can be together. Forever.

Eerily calm Nathan grabbed freaked out Theresa by the shoulders and kissed her lips, forcing himself on her as she tried to pull away. But Nathan was strong, and merely held her wrists when she pushed him off, holding her closer to him, in a tight grip. Finally, he pulled away, let her go, and smiled at her-- delusional.

“See Theresa? We belong together.”

Stunned Theresa just stared back at Nathan in staggered thought, gulped in fearful realization of his total insanity, eyed the water helplessly, jumped in, swam below, and put the oxygen masks on Abe, Mary and Nelson. But Nathan jumped in to stop her. She struggled to get free of him, then kicked back up to the surface, for air. Perhaps seeing this as her only chance to escape Nathan-- who was still in the pool, taking the oxygen masks off of all of her friends and fiance... a nerve-racked Theresa jumped out of the pool, ran to her phone to call 911, slipped on the wet surface-- fell back--

--And hit her head on the sharp edge of Nathan’s wheelchair.

Suddenly, Skyler flashes back to Hadji, joking with Zack, in The Game Room, on Geek Night...

“Careful-- Nathan’s tougher than he looks”, Hadji joked, “You tell him one bad Yo-Mama joke, and you might get cut on the sharp edge of his uniquely squeaky wheelchair-- like I did.” His eyes stayed glued to the gaming screen as he held up his arm, to reveal the old, congealed blood, of a sharp cut across his forearm, “--Battle scars, bruh.”

Zack chuckled with Hadji, but Nathan suddenly looked ghostly pale with embarrassment--

No.

Not *embarrassment*.

--It was *guilt*, Skyler realizes now.

And he looked deeply devastated by being the butt of their joke.

No.

Not *because of their joke*.

--It was *because his fake wheelchair had just killed Theresa, only a few hours earlier, that day, at school.*

--*Nathan was devastated by loss-- not social alienation--*

Skyler gets it now.

And the reason why he looked like his mind had just been transported to another place and time-- is because it *was*. It was transported back *here*. To *this* moment. To *this* place.

--*To when he lost Theresa.*

Then Nathan snapped out of it, like a psychotically good actor, and rolled his eyes at Zack, like everything was fine.

Now Skyler flashes back to his Dad talking to him in his bedroom. His Dad nodded casually, and said to him, "Her murder weapon's still missing."

Of course it is, Skyler thinks, realizing now, --*because it's not a weapon. It's a wheelchair.*

Sky watches as, instantly-- Theresa was knocked out-- and then started to bleed out-- from the harsh, sharp blow--

--*Dead.*

--Because of Nathan's *wheelchair*.

--Because of Nathan's *insanity*.

--Because of Nathan's *lies*.

--Because of *Nathan*.

--And "*The Gods of The Universe*" Cult.

--And the lack of *trustworthy refuge* and *accountability*, in the 1 entity, youths are supposed to feel they can trust--

--*The police*.

Nathan jumped out of the pool, looked around, and saw Theresa unconsciously bleeding out, by his bloody wheelchair. He GASPED and ran over-- freaking out-- as he grabbed her.

“Theresa? Theresa!” Nathan shook her, and touched her wrist, trying to get a pulse-- but he couldn’t find one. His eyes widened as his voice quaked, and he shook his head, “NO! NO! Theresa!” Nathan cried furiously, holding Theresa in his lap, rocking back and forth, as her lifeless body stared up at the ceiling, and her blood soaked his clothes.

Finally, after 20 minutes of silent rocking passed, he pulled lipstick from his pocket, painted his lips, kissed her hand, drew a heart around his kiss print, sniffed back tears, picked her up, and gently lowered her into the pool, where she sank slowly to the bottom, with her Core 4 peers.

Nathan rolled his wheelchair into the shallow end of the pool, to wash off Theresa’s blood. Then he dove into the deep end, pulled out his oxygen tanks and stored them into 1 large hard, ridged, silver, wheeled, waterproof luggage carrier.

He went back in the pool, dragged his wheelchair back out, wiped any excess blood off of his wheel, pulled pink rose petals from an oxygenated bag in his backpack, sprinkled them all over the pool, grabbed his phone from the table, wiped the lipstick off his mouth with a washcloth, put the cloth back in his backpack, got in his wheelchair and wheeled away, dragging his big, wheeled, luggage carrier beside him.

--THEN--

The FULL Core 4 Death Video ends.

Skyler stares back at the screen, both thunderstruck, and forlorn-- and fairly certain that-- there's no way in 3 hells, Nathan will let him, his girl, or any of his friends live-- after letting him see all this.

Then, as if he telepathically summoned him, Nathan speaks, startling Skyler, who quickly turns around, to see Nathan standing behind him, with Laura's gun pointed at him.

"You should be thankful I aired the chopped version of this video-- incriminating the *cops* as The Core 4 killers-- taking full credit for all of The Valentine Killer's handy work. Got your Dad released from prison, as a hero, with book deals-- safe from their harm.

"I needle you on your Father's mistakes, but all in all, he's a good man. Honest. Means well. Only law man I can trust to work nonstop at taking down the *gods of the universe*. Your Dad's too important to the cause-- too valuable a working asset-- to be a lifeless martyr like everybody else.

"Martyrdom is for people who's death is more meaningful, or influential, than their life. That just wouldn't be true of your Father. He would simply be, another guy who died on the job. --So I had to let him go free. --I need him."

"Good to know..." Skyler stares at him tentatively, "And you don't need me?"

"--Well that's just it, Skyler. I feel like I *DO* need you." Nathan flits his head in light frustration, as if trying to decide which bag to leave behind at the airport, because he can't bring both on board. "I don't *want*-- to kill you. I don't *need*-- to kill you. But if you're incapable... --of cooperating with me... --I just might simply-- *HAVE*-- to kill you."

"Like you killed Theresa." Skyler shoots at him.

"I didn't kill Theresa." Nathan shoots back, defensively curt.

"Sure you did. The moment you came into her life." Skyler glares into him-- wondering if there's still any remanence of a sane, uncorrupted soul left anywhere inside.

“She came into mine. Willfully.” He sounds pretty confident.

“HEROICALLY.” Skyler corrects him, “Theresa and The Core 4 were HEROES who saved LIVES...” He glares back at him.

Nathan nods, not disagreeing with him--

--And not taking the gun off of him either.

Sky realizes this, and moves on with the serial killer itinerary for the night, “--So what’s the plan here, Nathan? You gonna kill all my friends like you did Theresa’s? Then get me killed purely by my hazardous association with you?”

Nathan sighs impatiently, “Alright. I can see that killing your friends would leave a bad taste in your mouth about me. And I don’t want to kill you, Skyler. --You’re my hero.”

Skyler intakes a repulsed breath of disbelief, looking away.

“So here’s what we’ll do. I’ll let you live. All of you. If you create your own Squeal Reels. Something Core 4 could never do. If each of your friends does it-- they live. But only if *YOU* do it *FIRST*.”

Sky eyes him, stunned, and even more nauseated, which he didn’t think was possible, “You want me to-- *kill*-- someone?”

Nathan rolls his eyes, “Oh don’t act like you’ve never done it.”

“I haven’t--” Sky shrugs, “Not consciously. And-- he was a rapist. A murderer. I could never-- kill an-- *innocent*.”

“Well that sucks chunks-- cause my next Valentine victim is not only innocent of all crime-- but also, a child. Her name-- is *Marybelle*.”

Marybelle?

Why does that name sound so familiar to Skyler?

“She’s the 9-year-old daughter of one of the 5 men, who helped that vile, vicious, savage, devil cop-- Pantaleo-- rape and murder your Mother and brother-- Sirius Stone Junior, 10 years ago. Officer Thomas-- I believe his name was.”

Sky gets a flashback of Officer Thomas on the roadside.

"I-- I'm sorry." He said to 6-year-old Sky, "They woulda killed my baby daughter Marybelle, and my whole family if-- I defended yours."

Sky suddenly snaps out of it and looks back to Nathan.

"So it's your choice." Nathan shrugs, "Either eye for an eye, *OR*-- you protect the daughter of a man-- who let another man-- torture, brutalize, violate, and end-- the life of your mum, and big brother-- at the expense of all your friends-- who *will* die, in her stead. --Do we have an understanding?

Skyler thinks about it.

Does he really have a choice?

He gulps, then slowly, and reluctantly--

--He nods.

"*Oh good!*" Nathan squirms with newly buoyant delight and a giddy lilt in his voice, like a kid at a toy store, "I'm so excited for you to meet her. Just got her today. Used your voice assimilation program to mimic her friend's Mom and make her Dad think she's sleeping there this weekend. Course-- she'll be dead by the time anyone figures out she's missing."

"Wha-- where is she?"

Dandy Nathan shows concerned Sky his even higher tech cell phone, and nods at Skyler to read it and move forward, in front of him, with the jerk of his gun. Sky scans the map on his phone, then realizes where he is and where he's going, when he sees that it leads to the basement.

Sky discretely glances back at the pool chair and potted plant, that he used to hold Nathan's back door open-- and he sees that they're both now on the other side of the door.

Apparently, while Skyler was being distracted by his video of The Core 4's final moments, Nathan pushed the improvised door stops back outside-- to make sure nobody else can get in.

--Or out.

However, next to the glass back door is a black box, mounted to the wall, one that contains numbered digits. Then he glances at the front door-- and sees another black box... --containing identical numbered digits... --mounted to the wall next to it.

Key codes.

Everywhere.

Every door is locked as soon as it shuts, and requires a key code to get out-- or in, Skyler realizes. That's why his friends couldn't escape Nathan's house. --They were trapped.

--Just like how he and Shyanne were trapped back in Brook's safe room.

--Only this place is way more advanced and higher tech.

--*They're not dealing with simple combination locks now.*

--They're dealing with uncrackable super tech.

--And there's no time to figure out how to crack it, even if it is crackable.

--So there's only one way out of this house tonight. And it's not through new school technology.

--It's through old-school analog.

--The dinosaur age...

--Of offline living.

--Of offline thinking.

--Of thinking *at all*.

Suddenly Sky wishes Shy was there with him again, the way she was when they figured out how to escape Brook's safe room together. Then he gets a flashback of her talking to him in his bedroom--

“Aw. Well your WWJD bracelet is a cool, sweet gift Momma Stone left you to remember her by.” Shy had said to him, “I bet it’ll come in handy, and unexpectedly, one day-- if it hasn’t already.”

A light bulb suddenly turns on above Skyler’s head. He hands the phone back to Nathan, and walks in front of him, trying to think of a way to distract him as he discretely starts unlacing his WWJD bracelet.

“Nathan-- Before-- we get there, and-- I do this, I jus-- I just have one quick question. For The Valentine Killer.”

Nathan rolls his eyes impatiently, “He’s not a split personality, Sky. He is me. And I am him. But go on.”

Skyler hides his bracelet, as he unlaces it, “Right. Well-- Why do you use hash-tags for the 3 gods of the universe cults on your Valentine Cards? Any time me, my Dad, or anyone, googled them online-- nothing came up.”

Nathan sucks his teeth, with a frustrated, knowing sigh, “Yes, well, it was supposed to be a clue to lead you all to the evil trinity’s secret intranet. They have their own private network, to plan and praise all of their wrongdoing. I thought that you, of all people, would’ve been the one to figure *that* out.” He thinks about it, “Though-- Perhaps I *was* a bit too subtle, in certain areas. Like that one.”

Skyler inconspicuously gets his bracelet off.

“OK-- Then-- Why not just-- lead the Feds-- directly to their intranet then? With an actual link or coding clue?”

Nathan shakes his head at Skyler’s naivete, “Because there’s no greater waste of energy, and murder of trust, then to repeatedly tell someone to follow a link to a place that’s disappeared-- always gone by the time they get there.”

As Nathan talks, Sky hides his bracelet in his hand, and rubs his nose, discretely grabbing gum out of his mouth at the same time. Then he pastes his gum onto his WWJD Bracelet.

But then Skyler flashes back to himself, when he was sitting alone, on the floor, late at night, right after the police had raided his house.

“Always Constant-- Shift Control To The Year of The GOTU.” Sky thought about that a moment, with a furrowed brow, as he held the rusted old knife in his hands-- the one that he and Shyanne found, in that creepy, underground tunnel of skulls, weeks ago, “Strange inscription.” He admired the blade’s words for a bit longer.

“It’s an old command key,” Skyler realizes to himself, “to access the psycho factory’s private intranet network.”

But Nathan doesn’t hear Sky mumbling to himself, so he just continues, “There are so many people secretly working in the gods of the universe trinity. Do you have any idea how far up this madness goes? Giving away expired links-- HA! All that would do is get innocent people, who actually try to solve the case, killed. People who are NOT loved by monsters-- but HATED by them. Which is against my code and purpose.”

“Like The Core 4?” Skyler hides his gummy bracelet in his hand.

Nathan sighs, as if fatigued by this accusation, “I did *not* mean to kill Theresa. You know that. --I loved Theresa.”

Sky smirks, “Kinda like how you love me? With a gun to my back? --You have a *funny* way of showing “love”, Nathan.”

Nathan shrugs, matter-of-factly, “It’s all I have to give. I was gifted with nothing else. As a child, my parents had health and money problems. So the government saw fit to take me away from them, turn me into a ward of the state, and bounce me around in God-awful foster homes, until I landed in Saint Valentine Orphanage, where I was plucked out-- by the wealthy, perverted, gods of the universe cult-- and this is what’s left of me. This-- is all of me.”

They reach his hidden basement. Just as Sky suspected-- Nathan opens the door with a key code. So Sky stops at the open entrance, and turns to face Nathan, with his freed, gummied WWJD bracelet, hidden behind him, in his hand.

Nathan stares back at him, "What?"

Silent Skyler just tries to distract Nathan, with an uncomfortably alluring gaze-- like from his romance novels-- as he inconspicuously gums his WWJD bracelet, into the golden inlet-socket of the door frame, where the door closes.

Nathan eyes him back-- bewildered, curious, uncertain, and smitten, with the gun drawn on him. Finally, Sky secures his bracelet in the door frame, and drops the act-- gladly.

"Nothing." Sky turns around, with his back to Nathan again, exhales, feeling both relieved-- and dirty-- and he enters the underground realm of Nathan's dark castle.

Nathan looks confused-- but then follows him in, shaking it off. As the door closes, it quietly bounces back open behind Nathan, without his knowledge-- as the door's latch is unable to meet the door frame--

--Because Sky's What Would Jesus Do bracelet blocks the door from closing.

CHAPTER

[51]

MEET MARYBELLE

Skyler and Nathan travel down the corridor of Nathan's bright white, clinically spotless, underground bunker-- much like Brook's, only way bigger, and more scientific looking-- not homey at all. There is no couch, no bed, no wardrobe, no entertainment or workout center. Not even carpet anywhere.

But there *is* a bio-matter examination room, with cold, hard, silver tray tables and sharp, metal tools, and there is a giant, gray, stainless steel freezer that takes up an entire room-- probably to store any unexpected-- or otherwise inconveniently timed-- dead bodies.

Skyler shivers in the cold, soulless, clinically white lab, and suddenly, he feels like he's back in the hospital again, at 6 years old, as he smells the sharp chemical scent of alcohol astringent, that permeates his nostrils.

He hates the smell of alcohol astringent.

Then, amidst the sterile silence, Sky hears the sound of liquid spraying monotonously onto a surface of some kind, and when they turn the corner, he sees why.

They pass an isolated greenhouse full of fresh pink roses, with an automated sprinkler system, that waters the flowers, as they walk by.

Then Sky sees a series of gunmetal gray prison cages--

--One harboring a little girl with shoulder length, thin, mousy brown hair. She wears a ruffled pink nightgown. With a cartoon princess on it. And a shiny, sparkly, girly little kid's Cross necklace around her neck. She sleeps on a cot, sucking her thumb, and holding a stuffed toy-- a fluffy, pastel, pink, little lamb.

Like an innocent lamb set for slaughter.

--*Marybelle.*

Ironically, she sleeps only a foot away from a partially bloody, old wheelchair, with a sharp edge on it, identical to the one Nathan's been using, but older looking. Sky flashes back to Theresa's Stepmom's house.

Steven cut his eyes at Zack, sarcastically. "Thanks for all your help, Zack."

"No problem!" Zack grinned cluelessly as he glanced back at Nathan, then looked at Nathan's wheelchair as if seeing it for the first time, "Oh, nice Nathan. Ya cleaned up and shined down your wheelchair-- No more squeak to kill my hot game wit da ladies."

Nathan opens the cage, nudges Skyler in, and then tosses him the gun, shutting the cage and locking it, "It's just one girl, Skyler." Nathan morally pleads with Sky, as if this is seriously anything besides morally wrong and spiritually insane, "One kid, compared to 6 more. The seed of the cop who helped steal and humiliate the life of your Mom and only sibling. All you have to do is shoot her. And save your friends from the fate of The Valentine Killer. Just-- *shoot.*"

Sky just gazes at the innocent sleeping girl, and sees flashbacks of his Mom, and brother-- and now his Father, too.

“SHOOT HER, SKY. SHE IS A MARTYR LOVED BY MONSTERS. SHE MUST *DIE-- FOR-- THE CAUSE*. SO JUST-- *SHOOT HER*. ”

Sky raises the gun, and points it at her. But his hand shakes-- and Nathan loses his temper.

--Not that it changes much.

“SHOOT HER, SKYLER! I KNOW YOU HAVE IT IN YOU! YOU CAN DO THIS! YOU’VE ALREADY DONE IT ONCE BEFORE! HER FAMILY RUINED YOURS. SO WHY SHOULD YOU HAVE TO LOSE WHAT’S LEFT OF YOUR FAMILY TO *SAVE HER? SHOOT HER!*”

Skyler shakes the gun more at her. A tear falls from his eye. Nathan loses all patience.

“DAMN IT TO FUCK, SKY! JUST SHOOT THE LITTLE MARTYRING *BITCH!*”

Skyler swiftly swings the gun around at Nathan and pulls the trigger fast and repeatedly at his face.

CLICK-- CLICK-- CLICK.

Nothing happens.

CLICK-- CLICK-- CLICK.

He clicks some more, trying to kill Nathan. But nothing happens. Nathan smirks, shaking his head, as he claps his hands in applause for Sky, who looks completely at a loss.

“Congratulations. I bet on you doing just that. You just won me a bunch of money I already own. Told ya I know you, Skyler. You aren’t capable of killing a little girl. Not even in one of your black outs.

“See-- that’s what I like about you, Sky. You are Skyler Stone. The Hero of Honor. Constant Defender of The Helpless. You’re The Monster Slayer. Whereas I am Proof. Both literally and figuratively. I am the proof-- that people who think they are God-- ruin the world. Therefore, I am The Martyr Taker.

“We balance each other out, brotha. We’re like Yin and Yang. Bonnie and Clyde. Cheech and Chong. I need you-- to be my Monster Slayer. You need me-- to be your Martyr Taker. That’s why I chose to keep you. Cause we need each other Sky. To light a fire and keep each other motivated. Now I’m going to go kill all your friends, so we can be together. *Forever.*”

“*What??!*” Sky freaks, “*NO! NATHAN! NO! PLEASE!*”

“I shall make it quick and painless. Like all my other martyrs. They won’t feel a thing.” Nathan turns to walk away.

Sky closes his eyes and bows his head, “Oh Dear God, Lord Jesus, please save me right now-- help me save us all.”

Suddenly Shyanne appears, and shoots Nathan with a tranquilizer gun, knocking Nathan out. Skyler opens his eyes, sees her, realizes, and grins tearfully.

“*Shy!*”

“Told ya I’m like a beeper!” She beams bright at him, through her cute, metallic-pink-rimmed lenses.

“Never outdated and always classic.” Sky grins back at her, through his dark gray, cage bars, emotionally exhausted.

Shyanne grabs Nathan’s keys and unlocks the cage. Skyler quickly leaps out and hugs Shyanne tight. She grins proudly, always enjoying his warm embrace.

“Oh my God, words can’t describe how much I love you right now angel” He kisses her in overjoyed tears of relief.

“*YEAH!* Good thing you jammed your *WWJD* bracelet into the *door hitch!*” She returns his gum-free bracelet to him and he puts it back on his wrist.

“I was wondering where everybody went when I came out of the bathroom and didn’t see anybody. Then I saw the light in here, heard screaming, and I knew you weren’t here before, so when I saw your What Would Jesus Do bracelet I was like *WHOA.*”

--HEY-- did you know that your friend Nathan here is The Valentine Killer? I just had a prophet seizure about him upstairs. He plans to murder us all-- except for *you, I think*. Probably. Maybe. Depends on his mood I guess..."

Skyler humorously eyes Shyanne, then Nathan on the ground, then Shy again.

"Wow. Thanks for the timely warning Shy. I had no idea."

They give each other a funny look. She sucks her teeth, smacking his arm, realizing that he's teasing her.

He breathes a teasing chuckle, then realizes, "Wait-- if you took out my bracelet, what's keeping the door open now?"

"A broomstick."

"Ah." He nods at Nathan and little Marybelle. "Good. K, well, you get the girl. I'll get Nathan."

Cheerful Shy nods assertively, like an attentive soldier --and does so, as Sky takes the keys from her. Sky drags Nathan into the cage, as Shy carries sleeping Marybelle out. Skyler locks the cage and hands the keys back to Shyanne, taking Marybelle off of her hands.

But Nathan gasps, waking up, shoots over to the cage door, and grabs Shyanne by the neck, through the bars, startling Sky, who puts Marybelle down, on the floor.

Nathan grabs the keys from Shy and backs up, letting her go, as Skyler lunges at him, just missing him. Shy falls to the ground, choking, and coughing like crazy, as she touches her neck, trying to breathe.

"Oh-- You *ARE* a smart cookie, Shy. But I learned long ago that surviving the evil trinity requires inoculating yourself to certain poisons. Like, taking immunity pills every day, to combat all the chemicals, in their famous little tranquilizer darts."

Nathan unlocks his cage-- and Skyler PUNCHES Nathan HARD in the face.

“Did you inoculate yourself to *that*?”

Bloody-nosed Nathan swings at Sky. They wrestle back and forth, fighting, until Nathan pulls out a 2nd gun from behind his back and SHOOTs the ceiling-- proving that THIS gun has bullets. Shy screams as Sky and Nathan wrestle for the gun.

Shyanne crawls over to Marybelle and quickly pulls her out of the line of fire. The gun GOES OFF again. Shy jumps, cowering, as Sky and Nathan scramble up.

Skyler charges and tackles Nathan into the jail cell, like a football player-- and quickly slams the door shut-- which automatically locks Nathan back in. Nathan trips on his bloody wheelchair and falls back, shooting up at the ceiling again, still holding the gun and keys. Skyler grabs Shyanne and picks up Marybelle.”

“*RUN!*”

They RACE OUT of the basement as Nathan unlocks the jail cell with his keys, freeing himself, and he CHASES them. They kick the broomstick away, shutting the basement door-- but then try to jam up the keypad, so Nathan can’t unlock it.

“LOCK THE DOOR! *LOCK THE DOOR SKYLER!*”

“I’m trying I’m trying! It won’t-- lock!” Sky keeps punching a bunch of buttons on the keypad by the door, trying to scramble it up and break it, but it won’t work, “IT-- IT NEEDS A CODE TO LOCK SOMEONE INSIDE IT!” Sky realizes.

Then Nathan SHOOTs at the door, from inside the basement, and Shy SCREAMS.

Sky grabs her hand, “NEVERMIND! *RUN!*”

They turn and run away, as Nathan BURSTS out of the basement door.

“WHERE DO YOU THINK THE OTHERS ARE??” Shy shouts.

Skyler thinks, and realizes, "ALL HIS VICTIMS DIE BY DROWNING! SO-- POOL! --IS THERE ANOTHER POOL??"

"UH-- I DUNNO-- I--" Shy thinks out loud, "OH! --THE FLOOR IS WET NEAR THE HIDDEN DOOR IN THE KITCHEN!"

"THAT'S IT!"

They race to the indoor pool on the opposite end of the house.

CHAPTER

[52]

MEET PRESTON ROOF

The analyst finally finishes working on the laptop at the police station, as dressed up Detective Stone and FBI Agent Diaz sit around her desk.

“There we go. Finally.” The analyst huffs, “Took forever to crack and get past all the layers of encrypted code and firewalls but I’m in. And the file name here is--”

She clicks keys on a board, and reads it out loud, “Preston England Roof.”

“Preston England Roof.” Detective Stone realizes, “P. Roof. Proof. I am Proof. What’s he look like?”

The analyst turns the screen around to face them, showing them a younger photo of Nathan. Detective Stone jumps up, thunderstruck and warring.

“What?” Diaz furrows her brow at him.

“That-- That’s Nathan. Hendrick. That’s Nathan Hendrick. One of my boy’s friends. The one in the wheelchair-- He--” A horrified look of dawning comprehension falls on his face, “He’s not disabled. He’s the killer. And he-- could be with my son right now. All of Sky’s friends are at his house.”

Officer Bob leans back in his chair, at his open-spaced desk, putting the phone to his chest.

“Uh, Detective Stone-- I just got a call from Officer Thomas. Said when he checked up on his little girl’s slumber party at a pal’s house, she wasn’t there. You said to let you know personally when any cop’s family go missing. In case it’s... Valentine?”

Stone and Diaz trade warring looks and race out of the station, shouting at the other cops.

“SEND EVERYBODY TO NATHAN HENDRICK’S HOUSE
AT 999 VALENTINE AVENUE! *NOW!!*”

CHAPTER

[53]

MEET THE CHOICE OF GOOD VS EVIL

Skyler and Shyanne find everyone woozy and drowsy-- but still mostly knocked out and tied to beach chairs, next to the big blood red candles, at the deep end edge of Nathan's 30 foot indoor swimming pool. Sky and Shy immediately start untying all of Skyler's friends.

But bloody-faced Nathan catches up with them, as he stumbles into the room, *shooting*. Shyanne screams as she and Sky duck Nathan's bullets. Marybelle wakes up-- to see Nathan shooting at them-- and she SCREAMS bloody murder-- Literally. Annoyed Nathan aims his gun at Marybelle. Skyler sees this, and knocks Marybelle out of the way--

--TAKING A BULLET for Marybelle--

--in his shoulder--

--A bullet that would have gone through her head.

"NO NO NO! *THEY'RE* SUPPOSED TO BE THE MARTYRS-- NOT *YOU!* WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?!", Angry Nathan STORMS over to Skyler and PUNCHES him in the face, as Marybelle sneaks away and runs out of the pool room, and back into the kitchen. "I WAS GOOD TO YOU!" Nathan shouts at Skyler, "AND YOU BETRAYED ME! FOR ALL THESE POINTLESS, WORTHLESS, *MEANINGLESS* PEOPLE!"

Sky finally PUNCHES Nathan back, HARD, FAST, and STRONG, also using martial arts to fight him, despite his painful bullet wound-- but Nathan knows martial arts too. In fact, Nathan appears to be trained in every form of fight skill that Skyler knows.

What fight skill ISN'T this guy trained in? Skyler thinks, feeling that he's met his match-- or like perhaps, maybe even-- he's slightly underweight for this fight...

But in fighting him close up, Skyler now notices the high tech video screen and keypad patch wrapped around Nathan's wrist. At first, it looked like a wrist warmer, or wrist brace. But now that the screen light is lit up, and showing a map of Nathan's house, Sky can see that it's not a medical tool or merely a fancy bluetooth--

--It's a control device of some kind.

Meanwhile, Shy continues to quietly untie everyone.

Nathan kicks Skyler, "I gave you friends! I kept your secrets! I funded your projects! I even made you a HERO! Star of your own hashtag campaign for social justice, as the new icon of morally uplifting inspiration, with your perfect little catchphrase, "Be The Hero You Been Waiting For"!

"And only *YOU* could pull *THAT* one off, Skyler. Cause, if it were *me*-- *my* campaign would have to be: "Be The *ANTI*-Hero You Been Waiting For"-- which is not quite as catchy. Plus-- I'm not likely the best role model for kids." He thinks about it seriously, and nods to himself casually, "Especially since I've already tried to kill one, numerous times today."

Sky grabs his leg and wrestles him to the ground, making Nathan hit his head on the arm of a plastic pool chair. But it's not hard enough to knock him out, and they fight. Sky gets the upperhand again, beating Nathan well.

Shyanne has everybody untied, but they've been tranquilized, so they're still too sleepy to function well. She struggles to help groggy Lissette and Laura out of the room, places them outside of the door, in the kitchen, as Marybelle hides behind the counter, and then goes back to Zack, Steven, and Hadji, as Nathan gets the upperhand now.

"Everything I did for you-- and you repay me-- by choosing those morally mundane, and purposeless *nothings*-- over your-- perfect partner-- in crime-for-a-cause?"

Skyler gets control, knocking Nathan around. Then Shyanne helps Zack up. Nathan sees this, grabs his gun, and shoots at her. Sky stops him, making him shoot the ceiling and a party chandelier, that falls, breaks, and pierces the gasoline bottle by the BAR-B-Q pit, which leaks gas. Shyanne hurries Zack out, as Nathan gets the upper hand on Sky.

"You were my Superman! I was your Lex Luther! Like Batman and Catwoman! We could have been *perfect* together! But I'll miss you-- like I miss Theresa. --What a waste of talent. --And you were both so *pretty* too."

Creeped out Sky topples Nathan, fighting well, but weakened by the bullet in his shoulder. Shyanne helps woozy Zack lie next to the girls and returns back for Steven. Nathan overcomes Sky with his own martial arts.

"And after I worked so hard to craft your life, Skyler? *I* deserve more love from you than *THEY* do. All you have to do is change your mind..."

Nathan shoves his thumb into Sky's bullet wound, on his shoulder, making Skyler scream and grab at Nathan's hand.

"Or maybe *I* can change your mind."

Creepy Nathan grabs tortured, howling Sky by the shoulders, just like he did to Theresa, and he kisses Skyler's lips, shocking disoriented Sky, in stunned, confused disbelief, as Skyler instinctively shoves Nathan away. But Nathan claws into Sky's searing wound, to weaken and overpower him, forcing himself on Skyler, as he grabs Sky's wrists, holding him closer to him, in a tight grip.

Shyanne stops short, seeing this, and her jaw drops in confused, grossed out shock, "Uggghhh--".

Nathan pulls away from Skyler proudly, and delusionally smiles. Sky glares murderously at him like he's a treacherous and vile-- creepy, slimy, slithering sea monster from hell.

"See Skyler? We belong together." Nathan smiles down at him, deluded.

"*Holy crap--*" Sky sees the depth of his insanity, "*You ARE insane if you think it's OK for you to do that to me.*"

Nathan looks at him, confused in his delusion, "*What?*"

"GET OFF ME!"

Skyler ROARS, as he PUNCHES THE CRAP out of Nathan and KICKS him off of him, SPRINGING Nathan a few feet into the air, KNOCKING him into a bunch of empty bottles of chlorine.

"I don't care *WHAT* the Democrats say. That shit is *MESSED UP--* and *NOT COOL--* and if you *EVER* assault me again-- I will *KICK YOUR ASS* into a *WATERY GRAVE*, you sick *PSYCHO!*"

Then Sky WINCES as he stands up, rotating his shot shoulder, to push through the pain, and get it working again, grabbing his wound in visceral agony. Furious Nathan shoots up to his feet quickly, enraged by Sky's ferocious rejection.

"WELL THEN-- WHY *WAIT?!*" Boiling Nathan AMBUSHES woozy, distracted Sky, charging him, and knocking him into his pool-- *SPLASH!*

Sky struggles through the pain, as he paddles furiously to float back up to the surface-- *FAST*.

Nathan glares calculatedly at Shyanne, seething, "YOU. --*YOU'RE* the reason why I can't change his mind..."

Shy gasps and freezes, looking up at Nathan, paralyzed in one spot, waiting to see what he does. Nathan flinches toward her. Shy flinches back. He flinches toward her. She flinches back. He flinches forward. She flinches back.

They stare at each other in tense stillness. Then Nathan smiles dangerously at her. Shy's eyes widen in alerted fear. And he abruptly hurtles toward her like a bullet. Shy yelps, as she bolts away from him, like a frightened unicorn.

Sky splashes to the surface, sucks in a big breath of air, and quickly swims over to the latter by the corner of the pool, closest to where he fell in, trailing red blood across the water, from his bullet wound. He glances quickly to see Nathan hunting Shy down, with a gun.

She's racing-- but he's faster. So he catches up to her like lightning and grabs at her, snagging the pretty pink beach towel off of her shoulder. She freaks out, screaming, as she realizes he's so close to her, and gallops away from him faster, breathlessly scurrying in circles, as Nathan chases her around the pool. He laughs at her with a psychotic cackle, through an intensely staring face.

"HAHA-- CAREFUL! DON'T SLIP! MY LAST GIRLFRIEND DIDN'T SURVIVE THE FALL!"

Nathan shoots his gun at Shyanne as he begins to skip playfully toward her--

BAM-- BAM-- BAM!

Shy screams and ducks, as she runs. But Nathan misses each shot, unable to target her properly, while running. So he stops and eyes speedy Shy intently, holding his gun out, aiming to shoot her-- and not miss this time.

Shy realizes he's stopped, so she stops on the opposite end of his pool. She sees that he's trying to shoot her, gasps, and tries to run out of the door by the center of his pool. But every time she runs, he runs faster. So she just paces, back and forth, quickly-- trying to avoid his bullet, as he mirrors her, focused only on her.

Skyler stops climbing the corner pool ladder to glance up at them. He quickly assesses the scene, and abandons his ladder, to swim quietly over to Nathan, who targets a withering Shyanne, as Shy slows down, having trouble breathing. Nathan sees this, and grins wickedly at her.

"Ready. --Aim. --Fih--"

Nathan starts to curl his finger around the trigger, as Sky emerges quickly from the water, and abruptly yanks Nathan into the pool, punching him like crazy. Nathan drops the gun-- and Shyanne immediately races back to Steven, helping him up.

Gas trickles down to the thick red candle's flame-- and catches fire. Shy hears fire roar behind her, looks, gasps, and hurries Steven out with the others, as the boys fight in the pool. Nathan starts to drown Sky.

Shyanne hurries, trying to help Hadji up. But Hadji is heavy. She can't drag him alone, and he's the least awake of all. The fire grows higher, as Shy sees Nathan drowning Sky, so she grabs the pool cleaning net and smacks Nathan with it.

Then she drops it on him, grabs a bucket of chlorine, climbs the diving board, and pours it over Nathan's head, from the diving board. He screams, dipping under the water to clean his eyes. But Sky isn't moving-- He's sinking. So Shy grabs a lifesaver, jumps into the pool, and looks for Sky.

At first, she can't find him. Then she sees him, swims over, and pulls him up to the side edge of the pool ladder-- but gets lassoed in by Nathan, who yanks her away from Skyler with the same rope that he used to save The Core 4, making Shy drop Sky back into the water.

Nathan drags Shyanne out of the water, slams her to the ground, pins her down, tries to blind her, by yanking off her glasses, and throwing them aside, as they skid across the pool room pavement-- and he chokes her-- passionately.

“It’s all your fault! You changed him! He would a wanted to join my side if it wasn’t for you! He’s a *KILLER!* Like *ME!* But you turned him into just another *VICTIM!* Like *YOU!* He’s a *HUNTER!* Like *ME!* But you turned him into another *GATHERER!* Like *YOU!* He was *STRONG!* Like *ME!* But you turned him into another *ripped-off* Farmer Joe! Like *YOU!* You *DOMESTICATED* him! You *SOFTENED* him! You *WEAKENED* him! You *RUINED* him! Ya--”

Skyler suddenly SMACKS Nathan in the face with a baseball bat, knocking him off of Shy, as he stands, dripping wet-- and breathing hard-- in front of Shy, “*SHE SAVED ME.*”

Nathan starts to stagger back up. Sky SLAMS him again with the bat, knocking him out, “AND YOU TRIED TO *KILL* ME. AND *HER.* AND ALL MY *FRIENDS.* --*A LOT.*”

Skyler pulls Shyanne up and hugs her quickly, grabbing her face and pecking her lips reassuringly. Then he hands her glasses back to her, and checks to see if she’s OK, “You OK?”

She nods, smiling tearfully at him, with tired terror in her eyes, and then she points to Hadji and the fire that’s slowly creeping toward his chair, by way of nearby objects.

Skyler turns, sees this and gasps, “HADJI!”

Sky and Shy make a mad dash run toward Hadji, to save him, as Shy puts her glasses back on-- but Nathan reawakens, and grabs Skyler’s ankle. Skyler topples over and crashes to the ground, slamming his face into the pool deck pavement.

Shyanne turns back, sees this, and gasps, realizing. But bloody-faced Skyler immediately rolls over onto his back, and kicks Nathan in the face. They resume fighting again.

Shy looks back at Hadji, whose fire is getting closer. Then she looks back at Sky, whose winning the fight with Nathan.

“GO! SAVE HADJI!” Skyler shouts back at her as he punches Nathan.

She nods, runs over to Hadji-- and tries-- and fails-- to get him off the chair again. So, instead, she just looks around, runs over to random objects, grabs them, and throws them in front of the fire, to block Hadji from the fire-- by feeding it with anything that will delay it.

Lifesavers.

Pool nets.

Wet seat cushions.

Lounge chair pillows.

Cleaning tools.

--*Anything*.

As Skyler pins Nathan to the ground, choking him, Nathan glances to his side, and sees one of his weightlifting blocks on the ground, near him. He grabs it, and without much difficulty, he whacks Sky in the head with it.

Skyler falls over to the ground, by Nathan, grabbing his head in pain. Nathan takes this opportunity to jump on top of Sky, and ram the weight block into Skyler's neck, pinning him down by it. Sky pushes the weight back, giving him minimal space to breathe-- but labors to break free from the tug-of-war bind, that it creates between him and Nathan.

Nathan looks around his indoor swimming pool chamber, as if to logically assess the circumstances... just for general knowledge-- and his eyes fall on Shyanne, as she tries to get Skyler's last friend free, from the beach chairs, by the deep end edge of the pool. Then he looks back at Sky, whose neck he struggles to keep pinned, beneath his heavy muscle-building workout weights, and he sort of smiles at him, with a psychotically sentimental gaze.

“Aw. Look at us, Skyler. It’s kind of poetic, isn’t it? The 3 of us, being the last ones standing, at the *first* epic showdown, of this-- *WAR*, on The Gods of The Universe Trinity?

“*YOU*-- a victim of the *culturally* dehumanizing, *racial* supremacy, *legal* cult, *WHITES ARE GOD*-- that systematically abuses and destroys people, based on what they *LOOK LIKE*, and *WHO* they come from. And has gotten away with it for *CENTURIES*, by manipulating and violating our *CONSTITUTION*.

“Your girlfriend, *SHYANNE*-- a victim of the *ideologically* dehumanizing *philosophical* supremacy, *media* cult, *WE ARE GOD*-- that systematically abuses and destroys people, based on what they *BELIEVE*, and *WHY* they come by it. And has gotten away with it for *DECADES*, by manipulating and violating our *COMMUNICATION*.

“And *ME*-- a victim of the *economically* dehumanizing *financial* supremacy, *business* cult, *WEALTH IS GOD*-- that systematically abuses and destroys people, based on what they *HAVE*, and *WHERE* they come from. And has gotten away with it for a *MILLENNIA*, by manipulating and violating our *CAPITALISM AND COMMERCE*.

“We’re like the *trifecta* of dehumanized *youth*, who’ve been abused, violated, and demoralized, by *all* that is *wrong* with the world.”

Skyler struggles to breathe, as the weight of Nathan’s heavy metal weightlifting block crushes down on his throat, “Yeah-- except for 1 thing. Me and Shy *directly fought back*, against our villains-- whereas you... --*You became one*.”

Nathan tilts his head eerily at him, with a creepy, knowing smile and half-nod, “Yes. Well. We can’t all come out of tragedy and psychosis without picking up a few bad habits. But good for you, for breaking the cycle, Skyler. It’s a shame that you made me have to kill you now.”

Just then, Shy sneaks up behind Nathan-- and CLOBBERS him in the head, with a heavy frying pan. He lets go of the weights and falls off, disoriented, as Sky shoves the weights off of his neck.

Sky smiles tiredly at Shy, rubbing his neck, "Thank you, sweetie."

"No problem, honey."

They humorously blow each other a quick, adorable kiss, and go back into fight and rescue mode. Shy runs back to the chairs, and resumes freeing Skyler's last friend, Hadji. Sky staggers up, cracks his neck, taps an elbow and intentionally free-falls back down to the ground, crashing the back of the joint between his forearm and upper arm, into Nathan's back.

Nathan HOWLS in pain, as Sky slams his fist into his face, and they resume wrestling and fighting for physical dominance. Sky makes one last giant blow to Nathan's head.

--And Nathan passes out.

Then Sky immediately looks over at Shyanne, who has run out of things to block and delay the fire with, as a small mountain of flames heats up the back of Hadji's chair. The flickers of fire lick their way closer and closer to Hadji, warming him up-- until they start to actually wake him up.

Skyler springs to his feet and runs over to Shy and Hadji, as she fails, yet again, to lift him up. Sky lifts groggy Hadji up, as his chair CATCHES FIRE, and he limps with him away from the fire, carrying him outside of the pool room, followed by a worn-out Shyanne.

"The house is rigged like a digital maze. How do we get out?"

There are exhausted tears in her voice-- and her eyes.

Skyler thinks about this, realizes-- Then he runs over to Nathan, lifts the sleeve up off of his wrist, grabs the control device that he noticed on Nathan's arm earlier, and studies it, until he sees the words, "Unlock All Doors and Windows". He clicks that button, and suddenly, he hears dead-bolt locks everywhere-- suddenly open.

Skyler smiles-- relieved, "It worked! We're free!"

Sky looks up, and sees that Shyanne is in the kitchen, trying to fully awaken all his woozy, groggy friends, to get them to stand up, so they can leave. He just smiles to himself any way, and starts to get up, to go join them.

But Nathan awakens, grabbing the knife hidden under his white robe, and he grabs Sky's wrist, knocks him to the ground, gets on top of Skyler, and starts choking him. Then he pulls out soft pink rose petals, Valentine Cards, and blood red kiss heart lipstick, from inside of his robe.

"Don't worry, Skyler. You will go down in history as the greatest martyr of all, loved by the greatest monster of all-- *ME-- The Valentine Killer himself!* Though the one thing that will always haunt me-- is not knowing *why*."

"*Why* did you save Marybelle? After *everything* that little girl's Dad and his friends, let happen to you and your family? Why did you sacrifice yourself-- to save just another hopeless soul-- who won't even appreciate it-- later on?"

Sky chokes, trying to breathe, "What would, *Jesus-- do?*"

Nathan smirks, with a creepy smile, "You're such a pure soul, Skyler. But you are right. Our history class, does show us, how Jesus did get crucified on that Cross-- in order to save every Believer's soul from eternal hellfire, and nightmarish damnation, with the vicious, rapey little demons, that peel away your flesh, like a fresh tangerine each night, before they violate you, like a slave-- forever;

"So that every Believer can go to heaven, and enjoy the supernatural gift, of spiritual paradise, forgiveness, salvation, redemption, peace, fulfillment, unparalleled happiness-- and unconditional love, with Him-- their Savior, their Creator, and their Holy Ghost-- in that divine, celestial empyrean-- of the afterlife."

“So I suppose *Christ*-- was really the greatest martyr of all. Loved by the greatest monsters of all. --*Mankind*. --And unfortunately-- it looks like you-- will suffer the same fate. --Goodbye. Skyler Stone.”

Nathan pulls Lissette’s butcher knife out from beneath his robe, and he lifts it high, to stab Sky. But--

BANG!

A gun shot rings out.

Nathan looks down-- and sees blood appear on his left.

CLANG!

Nathan drops the knife-- to touch the upper right area of his body. He feels it with his hand, in pain. Then he studies his suddenly wet, red, bloody hand, looks at confused Sky with an oddly forlorn expression, and touches the waterproof sky blue Cross-stickered flash drive on the chain, around Skyler’s neck, as if noticing it for the first time. He smiles strangely and knowingly at it-- Then back at Sky.

“This is only the beginning...” He peers into him with a drained-yet-laughing grin.

Skyler glowers in disgust at him, then kicks Nathan into the pool, spilling his pink rose petals, sea of Valentine Cards, and red heart kiss lipstick, all over the pool, around him-- as the fire RISES higher around them. Sky stares at the bloody pool, in exhaustion.

“Shut up Nathan. --This is The End.”

Nathan’s Valentine Killer lipstick falls to the bottom of the pool. Sky looks to his side-- and he sees... --his arctically enraged Dad holding the smoking gun, that shot Nathan, alongside a predictably shocked Officer Bob, a deadly focused Agent Diaz, more confused police, and other sharp-shooting federal agents, who are all spread out around them, holding their pistols and rifles up, ready to fire.

For the first time in his life, it hits Skyler--

His Father was there to save him.

Sky huffs in profound relief, dropping his head back down to the ground, worn out--
--As the fire ROARS on.

ACT IV: PART 3 - THE SECRET INVITATION

CHAPTER

[54]

MEET THE LIFESAVER

Skyler's Dad runs over to Skyler, with amped up, angry war all over his face, followed closely by Agent Diaz and Officer Bob, as various cops check the pool to start fishing Nathan out, and Federal agents start asking Skyler's friends questions in the kitchen, as they all fully wake up, with Shyanne and Marybelle getting interviewed 1st.

"Dad--", Skyler pants in tearfully grateful wonder, looking up at him, "You're here-- to save me."

Detective Stone raises a funny, perplexed eyebrow at his apparently-still-traumatized son, not realizing the profundity of Skyler's meaning, "Well of course I'm here to save you, boy! I'm your Father and you're my son, Skyler! Where else would I be?"

Skyler laughs painfully to himself, realizing his Dad still doesn't get it or understand him-- but that's OK.

"Thanks for being there to save me, Dad--" Sky croaks out with a painful cough, "You're a lifesaver."

Detective Stone grunts in disbelief, shaking his head, "You're welcome. Now have you lost your mind, boy?! What in Sam hell are you doing here? Why didn't you *CALL* me to come rescue you? He could of *KILLED* you all!"

Sky cough-chuckles in pain.

“Well Dad-- I had to come. Cause I once heard a wise man tell a demon that: ‘*Monsters never reign forever. Eventually they all go down. Team Good always wins the final battle. David beat Goliath to the ground.*’ --And we did-- Didn’t we?”

He smiles weakly at his Dad, who stares at him, in stunned awe and dawning pride. Dad smiles and hugs him tight, shaking his head at Skyler, who coughs and shivers from all the choking and blood loss.

“Yes Sky. Team Good *does* win the final battle. David *did* beat Goliath to the ground. Heheh-- *My* boy, heheh. My boy.” Skyler’s Dad laughs to himself, shaking his head, as he embraces the fruit of his loins.

But then Skyler notices the clear liquid that trickles further away from a gasoline container, as it creeps onward-- only a few inches away from the fire.

“Uh-- Dad--”

Skyler’s Dad pulls away to look at Sky, sees worn-out Skyler nod-point over to the gas and fire, and he gasps.

“*EVERYBODY OUT! NOW! HURRY UP! THE PLACE IS GONNA BLOW! GET OUT! NOW-- NOW-- NOW-- NOW-- NOW!*”

The police and agents collect all the drowsy teens, lifting most up like crutches, and carrying the ones who are too drowsy over their shoulders. Officer Bob grabs wobbly, disoriented Hadji, Agent Diaz grabs frightened Marybelle, and Shyanne and Skyler’s Dad help faint Skyler limp out, as they all RACE OUT of the giant house and it CATCHES FIRE. The fire hits the gasoline, the generators, the gas stove, the cars--

--And everyone runs out, as the house EXPLODES.

BOOM!

Everyone leaps into the air, and crashes to the ground, on the wide side of Nathan's extremely green, and perfectly cut, grassy front yard. Then they all look back, to watch the big, beautiful, brilliant, terrifying, red, orange, yellow and black explosion, in all its epic spectacle of loud popping glory and madness-- as it smokes into the quiet, peaceful, dark blue night sky, lighting up their dirt-stained faces like the 4th of July.

Looking weary and war-torn, they all just stay down, lying back on the grass, watching the house burn. Shy's Cross charm bracelet jingles, as she covers her mouth, coughing.

Zack yawns, groggily, with sleepy, tired eyes, as his twitchy hands still shake involuntarily, "Whoa. --What a waste." He openly recognizes his overview of the situation.

"Yeah." Shyanne nods, still coughing, "All that spy talent. Nathan could have been a plus to society-- not such a minus." She sniffs back tired tears of anxiety and jittery relief, "But to educate a man in mind and not in morals-- is to educate a menace to society. --Teddy Roosevelt."

"Huh?" Zack realizes she means something else than what he meant, "Oh-- Yeah-- That too. But I meant all that gold and wealth. Going up in flames. We deserve some of that. Purely for retribution."

Sky gawks at him, "Wow, you really did *not* like Nathan."

Zack gawks at him harder, "Bro! He tried to *kill* us, like-- *A LOT!*"

Shy half-nods, "Yeah, but you're not saddened by it?"

Zack shrugs, rubbing his face and head, "Meh. I always knew there was somethin' off about that kid. I just didn't know it was like-- *serial killer* off. That's like-- *REALLY* freakin' off."

Everyone nods in agreement, sapped of all vital energy. Sky hears the faint buzz of a motor out on the water, looks over to the giant lake in Nathan's backyard, and sees the slight shadow of a white motor boat speeding away from Nathan's house. He nudges Zack's arm.

“Hey-- You see that?”

“See what?”

Zack looks, but sees nothing. Then Sky looks further-- and also sees nothing. So he shrugs.

“Nothin’.”

In front of Nathan’s mansion, the paramedics in the back of their van grab shirtless Sky’s now-blood-stained Cross drive, from around his neck, to remove it. But he holds it in place and shakes his head at them. So they leave it, and keep working to wrap up his bullet wound in the van, as Officer Thomas pulls up in his cop car, and jumps out, frantically searching for his daughter.

“MARYBELLE? MARYBELLE!”

“DADDYYYYYY!”

Marybelle stops sipping on the cold, wet, pink slurpee in her hands, to run out of the medics’ van care, and into the arms of her tearfully relieved Dad, now 31-year-old Officer Thomas, who looks up to see Skyler getting his shoulder’s bullet wound patched up in an ambulance.

Marybelle whispers into Officer Thomas’s ear, as she points over to Skyler. Thomas looks twice at Sky, as if recalling him, but not sure how. Then he drifts over to him, and speaks humbly to him.

“My uh-- My daughter says you-- took a bullet for her. You-- knocked her out of the way. And-- got shot by the killer-- instead of her. Is that-- true?”

Sky looks up at the man standing in front of him, flashes back to his face, through the keyhole, when he was in that trunk, as a 6-year-old-- and he recognizes him.

Finally, a formal greeting, with the guy who could have shot those mongrels, and saved his family, 10 years ago. But didn’t. Because he was afraid.

At long last--

This--

--is Officer Thomas.

Skyler stares at him coldly.

“Yes Daddy. He saved me! My hero!” Marybelle sweetly nods, as she hugs her Father’s hand, and sips merrily on her pink slurpee.

Officer Thomas nods to her, and smiles at Skyler, “Well-- I just wanna thank you for-- saving my little Marybelle.”

He offers his hand to Skyler to shake it. But Sky doesn’t even look at it. He just stares at him with intense, visceral, angry frustration and disgust-- fuming.

Feeling the unexplained silent hate, Thomas nods, turns, and starts to walk away. But then... Skyler decides to talk back to Officer Thomas.

“But what if I didn’t save her? What if I just stood by and watched her die?”

Thomas stops, turns, and looks at him, quizzically confused, as he speaks.

“Or worse? What if my only saving grace-- was that I let one of her family members live-- by just not telling her killer, that I saw one more kid, left in the trunk, of an old black and neon orange race car, that we pushed into a ditch-- by the side of a vacant road, one sunny afternoon?”

Officer Thomas starts to look a little less confused...

“What if all I could say to you was, ‘I’m sorry. But they woulda killed my baby daughter Marybelle-- and my whole family-- if I defended yours’?”

Thomas gulps in red-faced realization-- hands shaking.

“What if that was the conversation we were having right now, instead, --Oh Doubting Thomas?” Skyler shakes his head in seething contempt at him.

--Humph. And just think. --If you'd just let *ME* die that same day, the way you let my Mom and brother die 10 years ago-- your dear little daughter Marybelle would be dead right now *too*. Because I wouldn't have been here to save her from The Valentine Killer.

--How *ironic*.

"God teaches you a lesson, about fecklessly doing the right thing, through rewarding *you*, for passively helping me, escape *your* villainous friends, by having *me*, actively take a *bullet*, to save *your* daughter-- 10 years later.

"But my Mother and brother are still *dead*-- after being *tortured*-- by *your* villainous friends. And their *murderers*-- their *torturers*-- their *violators*-- are still walking *free*-- and *alive*. --*Well*--" He rethinks that, "--Save for *1 out of 6*. So-- *one down, five to go*-- *I guess*."

Then he looks at gleeful Marybelle, who's distracted by a neighbor's puppy that she pets, as it wags its tail and sniffs at the slurpee in her hands, and he thinks about it.

"Or 4 to go."

He glances down at the red, white, and gold Secret Ridge Christian School ring on his ring finger, with its S.R.C. initials inscribed into it.

"But no big bag full of finely cleaned, stolen money, mysteriously left on our doorstep-- can ever make up for what happened to my family 10 years ago. You were the only one who had any moral conscience-- or impulse to stop it-- and do the right thing. --And you didn't use it. --You did nothing."

Thomas slowly steps to Sky, pushing Marybelle back, to stay where she is, out of earshot, as tears stream down the officer's face. His voice barely audible-- just loud enough.

"You saved-- *MY* family-- after I let-- *YOURS*-- *DIE*?"

Skyler shrugs, like he's over it all-- comfortably cemented in an armor of apathy now.

“Unlike some people, I wouldn’t know how to live with myself, if I allowed the violation, humiliation, torture or death of an innocent. And a female? A Mother? Someone’s kid? They are the ones we *men*-- were born to *protect*. --Cause unlike *some* people-- *I have a soul*.”

Sky glares at Officer Thomas, expecting a fight.

But instead--

--Thomas abruptly breaks down crying, and hugging Sky’s feet, to the confused shock of both Sky and the paramedics, who trade looks and back off of Sky, to go to another truck. Sky looks around, embarrassed, as some people stop and stare, or just stare as they slowly walk by. Skyler just nervously waves to them all, with a nod, to make them move on.

“Oh my God--” Officer Thomas weeps, “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry! I was such a coward! Such a-- a *monster*! I’m so sorry! I swear to God! I’ve been trying so hard to make up for it ever since! And I know the money wasn’t enough to make up for your Mom and brother, but it’s all I had! It’s all I could give you to-- to-- I-- I just-- If I’d come forward, they woulda jus made me disappear. Just like they make everybody who opens their mouth disappear. Then Marybelle woulda had no one to raise her, and I--

“I did wrong-- I was so wrong-- and I can’t make up for it-- For being-- a part of-- all that evil--”

His eyes glaze over, gazing down in dark memory, “I know --I know that... --But I’ve changed! I tried to leave as soon as it happened!

“As soon as I realized it was more than just harassing a few people, and poking fun at people. And maybe ticketing too many people. Ya know. The normal stuff. But they never showed me how-- how, *horribly bad* they were-- until I was there. --I’m so sorry! I hate myself! I hate myself! I’m so sorry--”

Sky looks down at him, and then over at a very confused Marybelle, who just shrugs, sucking on her slurpee, out of hearing range. Skyler looks back down at Thomas, completely stunned and speechless.

A single tear streams down Skyler's war-weary face, as he watches the officer fall apart at his feet. Slowly, Skyler awkwardly pats Officer Thomas's head with a hesitant pet.

The officer's face is drenched. Sky hands him a box of tissues, kind of grossed out. Officer Thomas nods thankfully, grabs the tissues, and blows his nose loudly and vehemently.

"I owe you my life." Officer Thomas wipes his nose, "Anything I can do for you-- I owe you my whole entire life. What can I do for you?"

Suddenly, Laura pops up, handing Skyler a flash drive, "Hey Sky! I got your voicemail-- sufficed to say. And I got good news and bad news. The good news is, this drive has the whole Core 4 Death Video on it. But the bad news is-- once it's released, all the psycho evil killer cops from that cult will go free. To kill more innocent people.

--And none of them will testify. Or at least testify the truth. Even though they've all been offered offensively generous deals, to snitch on their secret evil club. Guess it's like a cult oath they took or something. So without any eye witness to confirm the edited video, they walk. And they'll probably-- kill us all." She gulps anxiously.

"I'll testify." Thomas looks at her, "I was there."

"You were?" Sky searches his memory of the video, "But I don't remember seeing you--"

Officer Thomas nods, a bit over exuberantly, "Yeh-- Yes I was. I was there. In-- In-- the back. I saw everything."

Laura eyes Sky, who shakes his head at her. Confused, she eyes Thomas, "Officer, my family and I would like to come out of hiding now. Are you committed to your certainty that you were there and saw everything?"

Thomas nods, "As long as they don't take me away from Marybelle, then yes. I'm all she's got, now that her Mother's passed away from breast cancer."

Skyler jolts slightly and eyes Marybelle empathetically.

Laura nods, "I'm sure a deal can be made to make sure you're not taken away from her. My sister-in-law is a lawyer, and she can get you the best deal."

Officer Thomas nods, proudly committed to helping them any way he can, "OK. Great. Thanks."

Sky narrows his eyes at Thomas, "Officer Thomas-- Where were you *really* when The Core 4 Cop Crime event took place?"

He shrugs, "Show me the video again-- and I'll show you where I was hiding in it." He nods at Sky knowingly.

Skyler just stares back, unsure of this.

Then Zack pops up next to Laura, "Hey sweet thang. Let's say you and me get outta here."

Laura eyes him, annoyed, "Ugh-- as *if*. You terrorized me for *months*, you *Locker Stink Bomber!* *YOU'RE* the reason my Dad video taped the swimming pool at *ALL*. Then you let Lissette choke the living *crap* outta me! And you think that's all a way of showing how much you *love* me? How old are we? *Five?*"

Zack shrug-nods, "OK, well, in all fairness, all my locker stink bombs were *hilarious*, you *did* smack Lissette in the face with a shovel, and I *did* stick up for you when everybody else thought *YOU* were The Valentine Killer."

Laura looks at Sky, offended, "You thought it was *ME?*"

Skyler shrug-nods honestly, "Only when you kept attacking us, Laura. Whad you expect us to think?"

"Unbelievable." She shakes her head, and then looks down at Zack's dirty bare feet, confused, "Where are your shoes?"

Zack blushes, "Yeah, bout that-- Funny story--" He chuckles nervously.

She shakes her head at him. Steven, Lissette, and Hadji pop up, wearily.

"Why are we pow-wowing in the paramedics van?" Hadji eyes everybody.

"Sorry I smacked you in the face with a shovel, Lissette." Laura apologizes to Lissette.

"Sorry I almost choked you to death in a serial killer's mansion, Laura." Lissette apologizes to Laura.

"And how you *hurt* some of our *feelings*." Steven adds.

"Nope. Not sorry for that." Lissette shakes her head, folding her arms, completely unaffected by that.

Steven sighs, exhausted, "Why do you give me such a hard time, Lissette?"

She smirks, amused by him, "Cause I'm braver than you-- and that annoys me."

Steven shrugs, unimpressed by her emotional logic, "Well --since one of our best friends turned out to be an infamous homicidal maniac, and we almost died, in a giant hell-fire explosion at his house, I've decided that life's too short, to wait for you to see how great I am for you, Lissette. So-- if I could die tomorrow, just as easily as I almost died today-- I'm gonna die knowing, that I finally kissed you--"

Steven grabs Lissette--

--and kisses her.

Lissette is shocked, "Whoa-- Steven-- You can *KISS*."

Steven peacocks humorously, "Yeah, I'm pretty fly for a shy guy."

Lisette nods, impressed, “OK. Nice. But I’m still hit you though.”

Steven stops peacocking and makes a face, “Oh. I, thought that, we were, like, *past*, all that, violent stuff, since we just, like, survived murder, explosions, and daring escapes. We’ve experienced so much together! You even liked my kiss! So I thought maybe we can use this freaky life event as a sign to--”

“Steven--”

“Yeah?”

“Run.”

“Got it.”

Steven runs around the chortling group, in a circle, as Lisette chases him with her paramedics blanket, catches him, wraps it around him, and socks him in the gut. He moans a funny muffled groan-- and falls to the ground, completely covered by the blanket from head to toe. The crew chuckles, shaking their heads, as Lisette rejoins them.

Steven coughs out a proud shout, half-laughing--

“--*WORTH IT!*”

Then he realizes he can’t find his way out of the giant, oversized blanket, and everybody laughs.

“Oh haha.” Steven muffles out, “Laugh at the guy who’s stuck in a big blanket like a giant piñata.”

Chuckling Skyler shakes his head, and starts to go over to Steven, to help him out of the massive blanket.

But Zack dramatically throws his hand up, in front of Sky, to stop him, with humorously silly cool, “I got this.”

To Skyler and everyone else’s astonishment, Zack helps Steven out of his giant blanket dilemma. Everyone’s jaw drops. Steven gasps for breath, nodding blindly.

“Thanks Sky--” Steven realizes Sky’s not the one helping him, in shock, “Zack?”

“Oh come on.” Zack snorts, “Can’t a guy help his friends without yall makin’ a big ole deal of it?”

Steven stares back, truly awed, “No. No we can’t. Because seeing anyone outside of yourself is impossible for you, Zack. --Why --Why the sudden change?”

Zack sighs, “Well, I know Nathan’s a crazy serial killer ‘n all. Or whatever his real name was. So his opinion really shouldn’t matter. But he told me I was his least favorite member of the group, shortly before he bat-slapped the crap outta me and almost killed me tonight. So I got to thinkin’. Like-- If ever we were in a serial killer’s hitlist again-- and he had to decide which one of us NOT to kill-- I’d like to think he’d SPARE me first-- not GET RID OF ME first.”

“Aha.” Steven nods, “And what about the rest of us?”

“The rest of *who*?” Zack looks genuinely confused.

Steven shakes his head in disbelief, “Nevermind.”

Steven goes back to join their friends. Zack looks lost, then shrugs and joins the group.

Skyler claps his hands teasingly, applauding Zack mellow-dramatically, as he shakes his head, with fake tears, and pats Zack’s shoulder, “They grow up so fast.”

“Oh any ways...”, Zack shakes his head at him, with a laughing roll of his eyes.

“YAY! WE’RE ALIIIVE!” Shy pops up and hugs Sky, kissing his cheek, merrily relieved. She nods at the gang with a cheery shrug, as her silvery-pink-rimmed glasses hang from the neck of her hot pink swimsuit, between her silver shawl.

“Wow.” Hadji pulls out his video game, “You really *ARE* oddly cheerful around death. No wonder Sky thought you were The Valentine Killer first.”

“Heyyy--”, Skyler huffs.

“What?” Hadji laughs, as he looks for his last gamestop.

Shyanne giggles, nod-shrugging, “Ya know what? You’re right! We been through a lot! Let’s party! Where’s the music? *Champagne for everyone!*” Shyanne laughs.

Skyler’s friends eye each other, funny. Hadji smirks.

“Champagne? Woman, I am 16!” He finds his game and picks out a new avatar.

Shyanne’s surprised, “Oh, wow. Well, I was just kidding, but-- wait-- *WHY* are you 16?”

Hadji stops playing his game, “Ummm, cause I was born 16 years ago?”

Everyone but Sky and Shy chuckle with Hadji, as Shy looks confused, and Sky looks away, bracing for an explosion.

“Wait--”, Shy furrows her brow, “How-- How old are you guys?”

“Old enough.” Zack grins, “How old are you?”

“In college.” She raises an eyebrow at him, “And I take it you’re the youngest? Tall like Sky but, young?”

“No-- he’s the oldest.” Lissette grins, loving this.

“And the oldest would be...?”

“17.” Everyone says.

“Well, except for me. I’m 18.” Laura clarifies.

Shy stares at them, wide eyed, and freaked out. Then she stares daggers at Skyler, “You told me you were in college.”

Sky laughs nervously, “Yeah, I dunno what these jokers are sayin’. I’m 21-- I’m an old man!” He represses a chuckle.

Lissette grins, happy to break them up, “He’ll be 17 in a couple weeks. We’re all seniors in high school.”

Shy’s eyes widen more, in funny horror. Steven, Zack and Hadji grin, in celebratory awe, nodding in proud admiration of Skyler.

“Whoa Sky-- Your game’s so fly you can pick up college chicks?? Niiiiiice.” Steven gives guilty Sky unwanted dap as Shy glares at him.

“Yeah wow man-- You got mad skills! Hail to the king, haha!” Zack raises his hand to high-five Skyler, who quickly shakes his head discretely at him to stop-- but of course Zack doesn’t get it, “What? Why won’t you high-five me? Why ya keep shakin’ your head all fast like that?”

“Haha-- Yes-- Teach me your ways oh great college-girl-hunter!” Hadji nudges Sky boyishly.

Skyler gulps feeling Shyanne’s lament and intense glare.

“So ‘all those girls you kissed’ were all in high school?” She ogles him, dumbfounded.

Skyler starts to talk, but is fast cut off by Zack.

“You kissed a buncha girls and didn’t tell me about it?” Zack gapes at Sky, “Dude! *LAME.*” He looks a bit hurt by it.

Sky shakes his head at Zack, “No, that’s not-- *Dude.* You knew about Theresa-- and you were there for all the others--”

But Zack just looks toward the ground with deep concentration, still very clearly confused, “I was?”

Shy folds her arms, “And by ‘all the others’, you mean?”

Skyler balks humorously, “OH-- I-- I’ve kissed-- like-- TONS-- of girls-- before...”

Shy raises a disbelieving eyebrow at him, “How many?”

Sky shrugs, “Dozens.”

Shy stares at him.

Sky laughs, “Like, at least 10.”

Shy stares at him.

Sky nod-shrugs, “Maybe 7.”

Shy stares at him.

Sky gulps, “Or 5.”

Shy stares at him.

Sky huffs, "Fine! Three! OK? I've kissed-- 3 girls-- before you. The 1st one was Theresa."

Shy believes him now, "And the other 2?"

Sky looks away, blushing silently.

"*The other 2?*" Shy presses him.

"Were in a game of Spin The Bottle last 4th of July at a party--"

Lisette suddenly grins, realizing who Sky's talking about, "And the kisses only lasted like a few seconds."

Zack jolts slightly, realizing, "Ohhh yeeeah-- that's right-- I WAS there. --We *all* were."

"Theresa was the only girl he's had a relationship with before you."

Lisette beams proudly at Shy, with a cocky grin --as if this is the beginning of the end for the 2 of them.

--And she's head-over-heels excited about it.

Shy looks away from Lisette and glares at Skyler.

Sky pleads with her, "So? You've only had 1 relationship before *me!*"

"YEAH, a *LEGAL* one." Shy snaps at him in shocked disbelief.

"Hey-- My relationship with Theresa was *completely* legal." Sky points out to her with a knowing half-smile.

"You know what I mean."

"Oh come on, just 1 more year and 2 weeks and it won't be weird any more."

Shy just gawks at him for a moment. Then she turns and whisks away. Sky freaks out, and runs after her, holding his shot, bandaged-up shoulder in pain, as everyone watches.

"Wait! Shy! Hold on! Ow! Wait! Come back! Ow! Age aint nuttin but a number, baby! I graduate this spring! We can work this out! Ow! Ah come on!"

The remaining teens all laugh, watching Skyler catch up with Shyanne.

Laura rolls her eyes as the boys laugh proudly, clapping and making rowdy wolf sounds at them. But Lissette still looks humorously bummed out, with an abrupt frown of annoyance, when she sees Skyler put his arm around Shyanne, hugging her into submission, as they walk and talk down the street. Shy eventually hugs Sky back, conceding, but shaking her head at him, still in angry, embarrassed awe.

Laura smirks to herself, “Well I dunno about everyone else, but I sure could take a wine cooler right now.”

Zack instantly pops up with a red wine cooler, magically in hand for her. She looks at it, then at him-- and laugh-rolls her eyes, shaking her head, as she walks away, with folded arms. Zack pouts like a puppy. Hadji starts to play his video game, but then stops, looks around, and finally decides to put his game away for once.

Steven is shocked--

“*Hadji?! Did you just put your video game down?*”

Hadji shrugs, “Yeah. Real life has become so exciting, I think I’ll try offline recreation for a moment.”

Steven, Lissette and Zack gawk at Hadji, in total shock.

“What? I said a moment, not a *LIFETIME*.” Hadji scoffs, shaking his head, as they all gape at him, open-mouthed.

Then the group looks back at Officer Thomas, as he speaks to them.

“Hey-- If Sky ever needs anything, you all call me and I’ll get it for him. OK?”

He nods. They nod. The officer returns to Marybelle, takes her hand, and walks her back to the car. The teens all exchange looks, and shrug at each other, in mutual confusion.

--*NEARBY*--

Agent Diaz spots a few news media crews pulling up in their news vans, and she taps Detective Stone's arm. He looks up from his conversation with Officer Bob, and the 3 of them watch, as reporters get out and start reporting the news.

"The Accountability Police are here." She rolls her eyes.

"Humph." Stone huffs, "I dunno if they're the best heroes for accountability, considering how they lack so much of it themselves. But a little accountability definitely wouldn't hurt the force right now."

"The Valentine Killer, The Psycho Factory--" He looks down painfully, "The loss of my wife and first born child-- and the damage done to my only son. --None of that-- would have happened-- if there was better accountability, in all of these institutions that we all trust so much."

"The criminal justice system, and law enforcement world. The public education system, and media world. The economic commerce system, and business world. They all need to be vacuumed. Disinfected. Decontaminated."

"The well is poisoned. Toxic. And we're all getting infected by it-- a lot. So it's time to clean house. There's too much filth 'n pollution. It's slowly destroying us. Maybe not so slowly. Maybe it's killing us faster than we think."

"But either way-- it's ruining us. As a society. And it's hurting our families-- personally." He reflects back on his late wife and eldest son-- and Skyler. "That was The Valentine Killer's whole point."

"*You're taking that nutcase's side??*" Officer Bob gawks at Detective Stone in incredulous disbelief.

"Absolutely not." Detective Stone almost laughs, shaking his head in airy disgust, "But one has to ask themselves... Would he have existed-- if we weren't all... *sleeping*... through all this horror? If we made sure that the people with the power to prevent or fix all this, --all did their jobs?"

“Heroes get rid of villains. They don’t give them badges or pretend they’re not there. If those of us who are good, had been better superheroes, and just paid better attention to all the supervillainy, taking over the most important foundations of our society-- and stopped them, instead of letting them just, *run amuck*, right under our noses-- none of this would have happened, Bob. And in the coming months-- I intend to be an integral part, of getting rid of these super psychopaths-- and making sure this mess never happens again.”

Officer Bob looks down in thought, realizing the magnitude of his personal responsibility, in maintaining the righteousness, of the institution-- that he holds so dear.

“But we already got Slager and his boys set for trial next year, with the death penalty, and The Valentine Killer’s dead in the water.” Agent Diaz looks at him, a bit befuddled, “What more is there? ...We won.”

“The battle, Maria. We won one battle. But there are more bad apples-- bad cults-- and bad results of those cults-- that we still have to actively go after and take down. This “Gods of The Universe” Triad Cult is apparently wide-scale and far-reaching. So-- we won one battle. --But we haven’t even begun the war.”

Agent Diaz and Officer Bob trade tentative looks, and then they nod with Detective Stone.

“Well alright, Sirius.” Agent Diaz folds her arms assuredly, positioned on one side of him, as she narrows her eyes at him intently, with fierce resolve, “Let’s go out and get these bastards.”

Officer Bob nods, with his hands on his waist, like a proud caped crusader, “I’m in. Whatever it takes. It’s time to make this institution righteous again. What’s the plan, detective?”

Detective Stone nods solemnly, with a dignified, proud smile.

“The plan now--

--is to take the fight--

--to *them*.”

CHAPTER

[55]

MEET #THE-WAR-ON-WAG

IT'S WEEKS LATER as Einstein follows a festive, sharp-looking Skyler into The Geek Night Game Room, that's crowded with boxes of soda and beer, as party lights flash, and Stevie Wonder's funky soulful pop jam "Higher Ground" plays, in the room behind him. Sky searches through boxes on the floor, as his Dad enters, looking equally sharp, and does the same. They both don dashing, all-white party styles, as they both pick up boxes, both look at their boxes, then both point to each other's boxes, simultaneously.

"Soda?" Skyler figures out.

"Beer?" His Dad figures out.

They laugh, nodding, and trade boxes. Sky starts to move back toward the door. But his Dad blocks him, and puts their boxes on the pool table.

"Big year. This year."

Skyler stares at his Dad, trying to read him. Then he exhales, knowingly, "You're about to drop somethin' on me, aren't you? -- Good or bad?"

“Good, good, uh--” He clears his throat, “Maria and I--”

“Are getting married? Congrats. Surprised you bothered to tell me though, since you didn’t bother to tell me you guys were even interested in each other.” Sky tries to mask the slight bit of hurt in his voice, but it doesn’t work.

“I just didn’t want to get her into any trouble, Sky.”

“Understandable.”

“But yes. I just-- I know how we both still miss your Mom. And your brother. And how they died-- still-- haunts us both to this day. You actually saw it. So you-- I just mean-- Well, I’ll never stop loving your Mom, Sky. But I can’t keep living in constant pain. I have to let go. I have to-- *heal*.”

Skyler nods rather forcefully, “You want my blessing. Great. Well you got it. I wish you both well.”

“You say it like you won’t be parta our lives any more.”

“OUR’ lives, humph.” Sky smirks darkly, shaking his head at the laughably new thought, that his dad is so casually bantering about to him now as if it’s old news.

His Dad realizes, and pats his back, “I love you son. And I love your Mother. I won’t stop till we find new evidence, and then find that Pantaleo cop, who did what he did-- and bring him back for a retrial.”

“Retrial?” Sky looks disbelievingly at his Father, “A jury of *his* peers found him “innocent”. I witnessed him--”, his voice breaks as his eyes tear up slowly, “*Eviscerate-- my Mother’s soul-- and my brother’s soul-- for a uniformed audience-- that was paid to protect us. And a jury of his peers found him-- innocent. Because, the VICTIMS-- didn’t have a jury of THEIR peers there, to feel for THEM.*”

Sky shakes his head in disbelief, “Ya know I even heard people say I should be grateful, that we were lucky we even *got* a trial at all. Cause most criminal cops never... even get indicted to begin with. Let alone found guilty. They just get a paid vacation til everything blows over.

“Only reason we’re even goin’ to trial with The Core 4 Killer Cops is because a serial killer is involved. So now the FBI and everybody finally gives a crap about holding bad cops, and institutions, accountable for their rampant abuse of power, and the secret dirt they do, to undeserving people.

“Cause now it’s bleeding into *THEIR* turf. Matching *their* criteria. So I guess our government *doesn’t* really care about psycho lawmen abusing, raping, murdering, and destroying decent citizens.

“As long as they don’t become infamous serial killers, who leave colorfully creative paper trails, of all their VALUABLE victims behind. Like preppy high school detectives. And rich people. And cops’ families. Be honest, Dad. That’s the only reason the bureau actually gives a damn, isn’t it?”

“Skyler-- That’s not true. And watch your language--”

But Skyler keeps going, “They care more about illegally downloaded movies, than they do about the institutionalized abuse, that normal people face every day. It still haunts me to this day, ya know. What happened to Mom and Sirius.

“Like it’s-- the defining feature of my entire life now. And I-- just don’t know how to feel about a society, that tells me, that movies matter more than our lives matter. Or that copy paper matters more than people matter. Or that green paper matters more than people matter. I just--”

He laughs bitterly, “Animals get more respect.” He shakes his head. “And-- you just wanna-- hunt our family’s murderer down for-- *a retrial*? Oh we can do better than that, Dad. Pantaleo and his boys need to die. And so do Slager and his minions. --They all deserve to be burned alive.”

“Son--”

Sky switches his tone, gazing back at Detective Stone, “Dad-- Do you think there’s a killer inside me? --Like what Nathan, err, Preston, err-- *The Valentine Killer*-- said about me to Shy? Not like I’m just a random monster slayer, but-- like-- maybe I-- was born to be-- a professional grade one?

“They never found his body, when they drained his pool, after the explosion, ya know. What if he’s still alive out there somewhere? And The Valentine Killings stopped. But what if he only stopped them because Slager and his flunkies are about to go to trial, and he doesn’t wanna mess that up. And he still wants my help in getting the bad guys. And he knows I won’t help him if he kills any more innocent people.

“Like how the cops sometimes make deals with murderers and other bad guys, to help them put away even bigger murderers and worse bad guys? And what if there’s a solvable reason why nobody could figure out how to use that Command Key inscription, on that old rusty steak knife, that Shy and I found, in those creepy secret tunnels of skulls, to crack the Psycho Factory’s private intranet network?

“What if Nathan-- err-- Preston-- knows what that inscription means? And how to use it to hack into that... crazy cult’s secret, encrypted matrix system? He probably also knows how the WAG cults got away with, decorating their secret underground tunnel, with all the skulls of those missing persons-- and people nobody even knew were missing, as you guys just found out, and how nobody found out about it till now. Maybe this is all part of his 5-Step Plan.

“Step 1-- You give them spiritual and emotional loss, followed by public and private fear. Step 2-- You give them social and financial loss, alongside public humiliation. Step 3-- You give them mental and physical loss, after private humiliation. Step 4-- You give them the mercy of death. Step 5-- You move on with your life. What if he’s doin that now--”

Dad's face changes from warm, loving and sympathetically sad, to scared, defensive, and actively concerned.

"Alright stop, stop, Skyler-- *STOP*."

He steps closer, peering into Sky's soul.

"Now I dunno where Nathan or, *Preston's*, psychologically rabid body is decomposing at. And I don't know about that... Psycho Factory's secret intranet network, and how they hid a tunnel walled with skulls a secret for decades. That's what we're going to figure out. ...But you listen here, boy. There is nothing wrong with you. Not like that. You are not a murderer at heart, nor a serial killer by nature."

"What about by nurture? What I saw when I was 6?"

Detective Stone shakes his head at his son, "No. You are a genius Sky. Remember? You create. Not destroy. You know who you are. Don't let some psycho make you question your... whole existence and all that you are. Your Mom and brother were martyrs-- who were definitely loved. But *YOU* are NOT a *monster*. And-- well-- Sky-- I've-- been invited to join the FBI. And-- I'm gonna take the invitation. So--"

Sky realizes, smiles, and man-hugs his Father proudly, "Really? Dad! That's great! You'll really make a difference!"

"Thank you, son. Thank you." He nods, man-hugging him back briefly, then he looks at him, "Yes. But listen-- What I need now-- is your techno whiz kid, computer screen genius help, in dismantling this, "gods of the universe" psycho factory cult. What I *don't* need-- is you throwing your life and talent away on trying to become the next D.C. Sniper. So I need you to promise me. --You're not gonna let any crazy people get inside your head. --Promise me, Skyler."

Skyler stares back at him a beat, and nods, "...I promise, Dad." He looks down, and thinks, "And-- I'm sorry."

Dad eyes him, confused and puzzled a bit, "For what?"

“For--” Sky’s eyes tear up again. He tries to repress it, by coughing and looking down, “For being mad at you, for-- for not, for not being there. When it happened. I-- I was 6. I-- just imagined that-- that somehow, you could just-- like-- magically fly in on your superhero cape, and save us. And-- I’m older now-- and, I know that wasn’t possible. And-- even if you were there-- they woulda just killed you too.

“And then I woulda just been an orphan, and probably become a ward of the state, bounced around God-awful foster homes, until landing in Saint Valentine Orphanage, where... --I’d probably just come full circle, and get plucked out by the same wealthy, perverted Gods of The Universe cult that ruined my life, just like-- just like-- The Valentine Killer was. So, the fact that you weren’t there, actually saved me-- from becoming a monster.”

Dad’s eyes have welled up with tears a bit now too, but he doesn’t speak. He just nods, with a pained, wounded expression, then steps over to Skyler, and pulls him in for a big bear hug. Sky’s eyes rain down, as he hugs his Father, and tries to bury his old tears, into his Dad’s shoulder.

Detective Stone’s eye streams too, as he glances at the big white cross on the wall by the pool table, remembering his late wife and eldest son, and all the pain Sky’s been through, from witnessing the horror 1st hand, at 6 years old.

And he remembers how he never stopped wishing he was there-- to save them-- to fight-- to try. To choose them over a bunch of strangers, who were just having lighthearted fun, at a stadium filled with plenty of other cops, who could have looked after them, while he was looking after his own family.

--If he knew-- if he could choose-- he would have chosen them-- in a millisecond. No matter the cost.

But that choice was taken away from him.

Because he didn't know.

And now he would never stopped wondering...

Would they have still been stopped by those "bad seeds" if they were in a different car?

The car she wanted him to buy to replace that race car?

Or-- if he declined the gig, and he was the one driving the car, would he have driven them down that same road?

And-- though he never corrected Skyler-- he knew in the back of his mind-- that if he was with them-- and if he could have spoken up before the ambush of violence began-- he could have made it clear to those "bad seeds" who he was-- and they would have backed off, out of fear of pissing off their own peers, drawing too much public attention to their nefarious activities, and getting caught by their own. He could have shown them his badge if they didn't believe him, and that would've been all it took to save his family.

Skyler didn't know all the regrets and pain and sadness and guilt-- whether rational or irrational-- that his Father harbored, over that horrific day.

And he never would.

But the fact that he was strong enough to understand his Father's situation, and his Father was sensitive enough to understand his son's feelings--

--Maybe that was enough.

Though it never occurs to either of them, that had Sky's Father been there, and, likely-- been unable to enlighten the demonic-frat-boys-in-uniform, of his fellow police status--

--Skyler would have died too.

Because Skyler's Dad would have been sitting where his Mom sat, Skyler's Mom would have been sitting where his brother sat, and Skyler's brother would have been sitting next to Skyler-- in the back...

--And that would have blocked Sky from even being able to open the trick back seat at all.

--Preventing him from hiding in the trunk--

--*The trunk that saved his life.*

Finally, tearful Detective Stone lets go of his tearful son, Skyler, both of whom laugh, in boyish embarrassment, at their doleful state, as they briskly swipe their faces dry.

Detective Stone nods, tentatively, and leery at his son, with a cough to clear his throat.

“Very good. Now-- Let’s go back out there and enjoy your party, Mr. 17. Everybody’s lookin’ to serenade ya, haha. Oh-- and I want you to meet Maria’s sons soon. Mario’s 10, I believe, and Marco Junior is around your age. Mario’s a sweet kid. And I think Marco’s a cheeky nerd too. Like you. So you should get along just fine. With your new stepbrothers.”

He smiles. Congenial Sky nods. Then his Dad pats his shoulder, proud, grabs the beer box from the pool table and leaves, back into the trance music and colorful flashing lights inside. Einstein follows Dad out of The Game Room.

Then Skyler grabs his soda box from the billiards table, and starts toward the door. But suddenly, the dryer behind him starts rumbling on by itself. Something loud and heavy clunks around inside it. Sky turns, looks at it, then looks around the room, suspiciously.

Skyler puts his box back down onto the pool table, and slowly, cautiously prowls over to the dryer. He opens the dryer door and pulls out something that looks like a brick wrapped in cloth.

Sky unwraps the red, heart-shaped cloth, to find a pretty, shiny, gold bar in it. And behind it--

--his Mother’s missing, big, wooden Cross key chain charm, with the chipped, dirty white paint peeling off at the edges, exposing the aged brown wood beneath it.

He furrows his brow at it, with widening eyes-- as he slowly realizes what this means.

Then, as soon as he locks his eyes on the Cross, behind the gold bar, he hears his cell phone ring, and he jumps, startled. He pulls out his own phone, and sees the Old Text Message "FROM: Mentor Yogi- - To Overcome Loss, You Must Bear The Cross", with the emoticon Cross on it.

But no new message.

So he looks around to locate the origin of the ringing sound. He looks up at some folded red towels on top of the dryer, picks up one towel, and finds a throwaway phone sandwiched in between the 2 folded towels.

He pulls the phone out, surveys it, and reads a text message from the number 999:

"I know where the rest of your Mother and brother's killers are-- and how to get to them-- for retribution. I can also help you crack that intranet command key. And I know that you were born to slay monsters. When you're ready to "be the Anti-Hero you been waiting for"-- let me know. --And bring your waterproof flash drive with the sky blue Cross on it, for #The-WAR-on-WAG. --#GOTU-must-DIE. - -P.R."

Sky's eyes widen in fear, and he quickly looks down at the slightly still-blood-stained, blue Cross-stickered flash drive chained around his neck, then he looks back up at the text message-- and raises his eyebrow-- in curiosity-- as he ominously realizes to himself--

--This is only the beginning..."

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

“Chris Taylor” AKA “Christi Luv” has been writing since childhood, and has won awards for both her singing, songwriting, poetry and essays. She beat out hundreds of teens, chosen to write for The Orlando Sentinel Newspaper as teen journalist and music / concert reviewer. She studied writing and film in college, wrote, produced and directed the film short, “A Babysitter’s Nightmare”, and also collaborated with her writing partner / mom, to write, produce and direct the music video “Love Dance”. She has been a youth leader, who wrote several newsletters and an advice column, and has a strong social media presence, writing blogs, Youtube “TV” videos, audio books, and a soap opera, “The Young and The Powerful”. Between Facebook, Youtube and Twitter, she has over 10K fans, with songs trending at #1 on ReverbNation for over a year now.

“TP” or “T. D. Perkins” is a veteran performer of stage, tours (Marvelettes, Platters), TV, Broadway, Film (“Hair!”, U. A.), and recording (Motown, CBS), with songs published (“Maybe, Maybe Not”, “Smile”, E.M.I. Italy), and a studio singer on film soundtracks (“The Point”, “Lion King”). She’s written poems, stories, and stage plays since youth, later wrote, produced, and directed many summer youth productions, and has received awards from The Orlando Bureau of Recreation, Young Adults Progressive Club, NY Chamber of Commerce & Ohio Mayor's Office Recognition Awards for her work, presented by S.T.A.A (Support The Artists of America). She wrote, produced and directed a PBS TV documentary, “Did You Know? Well You Should!”, which won wide acclaim, was a journalist and theatre / film critic columnist for 5 years with The Orlando Times Newspaper. Affiliations include ASCAP, SAG - AFTRA, WGA, and FMPTA.

TP and Christi Luv write both fiction and nonfiction, in multiple genres, including young adult romance, sci-fi thriller, crime mystery, children's / middle grade superhero / fantasy adventure, supernatural / paranormal suspense, horror, and multicultural / historical action, as well as historical, educational, and inspirational nonfiction, with an eye for promoting better positive role model characters of more diverse colors, heroes, and the spiritual power and beauty of God. They also write their novels as screenplays, with the end goal of producing them as blockbuster films.

Follow Chris Taylor and T. D. Perkins AKA "TP & Christi Luv" at [Facebook.com/EntertainerChristiLuv](https://www.facebook.com/EntertainerChristiLuv), [Twitter.com/MissChristiLuv](https://twitter.com/MissChristiLuv), [ReverbNation.com/ChristiLuv](https://www.reverbNation.com/ChristiLuv), and [YouTube.com/ChristiLuv2005](https://www.youtube.com/ChristiLuv2005) to read more of their creative stories, and to hear their original music, poetry, parodies and upcoming podcast.

Also-- if you like "Chris Taylor's The Killer Secrets of Skyler Stone: My Funny Valentine", help turn "The Killer Secrets of Skyler Stone" romantic mystery thriller series into an audiobook and a graphic novel, by donating NOW to The Skyler Stone Project at [GoFundMe.com/SkylerStoneProject](https://www.gofundme.com/SkylerStoneProject)-- and join TP & Christi Luv's #HeroIsTheNewBlack movement @ [Race4Hope.wix.com/HeroIsTheNewBlack](https://www.race4hope.wix.com/HeroIsTheNewBlack)!

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